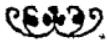


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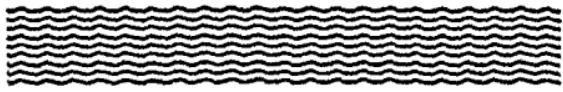
Thus in this tale an honest Frenchman, the Marquis de Barestan, does not want to eat his cake and have it too. His wife, the Marquise Billie, American heiress, however strict with herself, is not blind to the schemes of French husbands. The Marquis's mistress has a plan to increase her control. The Marquis has a plan to secure a divorce. And Billie has a plan for self-preservation. Two people without definite plans were the Marquis's best friend and a slow-witted male chaperon.



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AUTHOR OF
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Translated from the French
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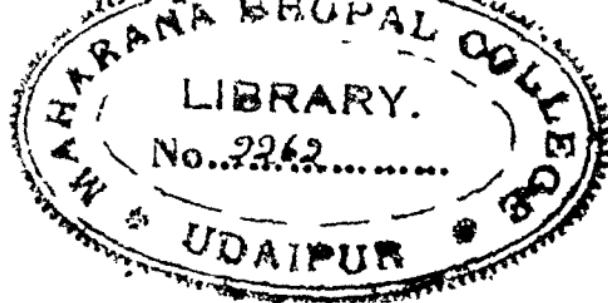
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PART ONE



THE PLOT IS PUT ON

I

It happened in a *cabinet particulier* of the famous restaurant: Adam's Apple, at Saint Cloud. The branches of the chestnut trees in bloom hung about the windows to see all that was going on behind the closed doors of this smart restaurant, frequented by the habitués of the Ritz, of the Madrid, the great ocean liners' of the Compagnie Transatlantique; frequenters of the baccarat tables at Deauville, devotees of the toy theatres of M. Jean Cocteau, and followers of the latest divorce gossip in the Anglo-American newspapers.

It was eleven in the evening. "Jack and his Boys" sprinkled about on an ornate dais, jazzed with dimmers the rhythmic syncopations of M. Cole Porter. Jasmin, the age-worn *maître d'hôtel*, fussed about the dinner-table, assisted by a young waiter.

"How many covers, M. Jasmin?"

"Four—four men."

"Without women?" asked the youthful servitor pointedly.

"So it appears," said Jasmin. "The manager says that this private room is reserved for the Marquis de Barestan and three of his cronies."

It was early in the evening, as far as attendance of patrons was concerned.

"Ho, the Marquis de Barcstan! Sounds ritzy. Who is he?" asked the young waiter. "The real thing or—"

"My little one," Jasmin scolded, "I brought you to the Adam's Apple in order that you should know Paris, and here you are not sharp enough to distinguish between a cheap South American fop and a real Parisian-about-town, or between a cold storage chicken and a smart woman of society."

The assistant looked sheepish. "How do you recognize them?"

"The flashy toff pays with his eyes closed! The real one, the old Parisian, examines his bill!"

"And the chicken?"

"Easy!" Jasmin confided. "She always acts the woman of the smart set."

"Then, M. Jasmin, how do you know which is which?"

Jasmin looked very wise, as became his position and experience. "You don't. You frequently take the one for the other. They are delighted, either way."

"I will try to remember." The waiter nodded gravely. "And this de Barestan? He is a cold storage fop?" In the rush of information to his head, he got his metaphors mixed.

"No," laughed Jasmin. "He is a representative of a lost race."

"Oh, a poet."

"No! A high-liver! You're too young, my boy, to have known the thoroughbreds, the real ones, the old gourmands and dandies of the Café Anglais and of the Tortoni. A thoroughbred is M. de Barestan, though young."

"Money is money," sighed the young waiter, "it doesn't matter to whom it belongs, you know that."

"Excuse me, there is a distinction," scolded the old man. "Those who make their money in the day-time are the honest ones and those who make their money at night are of the light-fingered gentry—the sort who smile in the American toothpaste advertisements and who pose for the latest 'what to wear' placards. The Marquis de Barestan is the real thing. His money talks intelligently!"

The young man shook his head.

"It's a waste of time to try to put you wise," grumbled old Jasmin. "Bring that pail of ice here and wipe that dirty glass. You should learn to observe social distinctions; in a few years, my lad, there won't be any more of these blown-in-the-bottle Marquises."

The waiter breathed into the glass and wiped it on the flap of his coat. Jasmin was looking the other way.

Shrill laughter was heard from an adjoining room. A rich American, successfully spiffed, was in there, host to a bevy of Parisian gold-diggers.

"Look what I've found on the sofa," cried the young waiter.

"A lady's garter!"

"Some fair customer must have left her signature last night."

"Fine doings!" murmured the *maître d'hôtel*. He looked at the garter closely. It was new! He put it in his pocket. Perhaps someone would leave another like it.

II

BARON CARDAN and M. Merignol entered the cabinet. Both were in faultless evening clothes. The elongated Baron was quite solemn and rotund, M. Merignol quite restless.

"Good evening, Jasmin," greeted the Baron.
"This is number five?"

"This is the room, M. le Baron."

"We have an appointment at eleven-thirty with—"

"With the Marquis de Barestan?" suggested the *maître d'hôtel*.

"Quite so," observed M. Merignol.

"Funny idea, our coming here, under the circumstances," commented Merignol, when Jasmin left.

"You received a message from de Barestan also?"

"An express letter, at midnight." Merignol, agi-

tated, pulled a pneumatic letter out of his pocket and waved it at the Baron.

Cardan searched about in his pockets and drew forth the replica of Merignol's letter. "What does yours say, Merignol?"

Merignol began to read and his hands trembled. "'Dear old friend: Will you be decent enough to come, at eleven-thirty to-night, to the Adam's Apple? Very serious affair.' He's got that underlined," Merignol paused to explain.

"There is a postscript: 'I have warned Cardan and Lefumez.'"

"Odd word," commented Cardan, "warned!"

"Extraordinary!"

"The whole thing is curious."

"He's bringing Lefumez too."

"But, Merignol, you're trembling like a leaf!"

"You find the whole thing a joke—even when de Barestan underlines the words: 'very serious affair!'"

The Baron was busy opening his letter.

"Dear Old Pal: Do me the courtesy to come to-night, without fail, at eleven-thirty, to the Pomme d'Adam. Extremely serious affair.' He's got that underlined too. Same postscript."

"Lefumez, you and I are, without doubt, the Marquis's oldest friends," said Merignol.

"That's a bad sign." The Baron smiled with the wisdom of many years' experience.

"When you send for your three best friends it's

generally because you've had a slap in the face!"

"But there are no duels since the war," protested Merignol.

"Hmm! What would be the worst catastrophe that could fall upon the head of a man married to a beautiful American?"

"A crash in Wall Street," Cardan instantly replied.

Merignol nodded in sympathetic agreement. "There are only two things in the world that matter—the bed and the purse! If it wasn't Wall Street——"

"Oh! Billie is incapable of deceiving her husband."

Merignol looked up at the Gods and smiled.

"She's not that sort of a girl," ventured Cardan.

"The Marquise is not the wife of Cæsar—she is the wife of de Barestan."

"Listen, Merignol, the Marquise is as cold and pure as a statue."

Merignol shook his head wisely.

"My dear boy, there are statues that fall off their pedestals. All that is needed is one stroke of lightning."

"You hint?" Cardan waggled a finger.

"That might explain this urgent conference of old pals."

Someone in the next room suddenly broke into hilarious laughter. A girl asked a man to sing. Then a male voice, rich with hiccups, began to sing that

once popular ditty: "It looks like Love!" There was a roar of feminine applause.

"What is that?" demanded Merignol.

Baron Cardan got up and approached the partition. The gay laughter continued. Cardan smiled knowingly. "There are some American advertising men in Paris this week. Some of our professional Parisiennes are probably displaying one!"

Merignol sighed. "The lucky fellow!"

There was a rap at the door. Jasmin entered with the solemnity of an English alderman. "If Monsieur will come this way. No, M. le Marquis hasn't arrived yet."

Baron Cardan jumped to his feet. "Lefumez!" he exclaimed.

Merignol stood up. "Lefumez! Now we're all three together."

III

HENRY LEFUMEZ was a young chap in his late twenties, though he looked much older. He was wearing a black frock coat, black gloves and a dark tie. The rest of his dress was in keeping with his sombre appearance.

Jasmin went out, closing the door softly. Lefumez

rubbed his hands together and then bowed formally. Despite his words there wasn't much warmth in his manner.

"My dear old friends," he said.

Baron Cardan looked at Lefumez with increasing awe and then began laughing. "So!"

Lefumez stopped stock still, disconcertedly. "My dear Baron——" he started.

By this time Cardan was laughing heartily. "Oh! Oh! Henry, you arrive from the crematorium?"

Lefumez, conscious of his funereal appearance, pretended to ignore it. "What's wrong with me?" he muttered. "Have I got some soot on the end of my nose?"

Merignol tried to save the situation. "How are things with you, Henry?" he said amiably.

"Very well, thanks, Merignol old chap." Then Lefumez turned to Cardan, who was still laughing heartily. "What the devil are you guffawing at, Cardan?"

"Oh, isn't he superb?" panted the Baron. "Ave Borniol! Those who are about to pass away, salute you!" He reached out his hand and solemnly shook that of Lefumez. "My dear fellow, I hereby retain you for my own funeral, decidedly. The perfect undertaker! But joking aside you received word from de Barestan?"

"I did," acknowledged Lefumez in mournful manner,

Cardan continued: "A *pneumatique*?"

"Yes, at midnight. How did you know it?" demanded Lefumez. He pulled an express letter from his pocket.

Merignol spoke up. "We received the same."

"Wait a minute," cautioned Cardan. "I'll tell you, Henry, just what your note says. Runs something like this: 'My dear friend: Will you be kind enough to come to-night without fail, at eleven-thirty, to the Adam's Apple. A very serious affair!' That last sentence is underlined. Signed: 'Yours—de Barestan. Postscript: I have warned Merignol and Cardan to be there too.' That, my dear young buck, is what is in your note from the Marquis."

Lefumez gave a fair imitation of a half-smile. He took out the letter and read it. "'My dear Henry: I have a date to-night with that good old sport, Cardan, and that first-rate old sprig Merignol. I want to discuss a rather serious matter. I shall have need of you too. Don't fail me. Your friend—de Barestan.'"

"Ah!" said Merignol.

"Oh!" commented the Baron.

"You know what's worrying him?" asked Lefumez.

Merignol looked very wise, but replied: "No."

Lefumez continued. "It is an affair of honour, isn't it?"

"We haven't the slightest idea," Cardan answered.

"It's embarrassing," admitted Merignol.

"In a way it's charming," mused Lefumez, "a real mystery. Don't you really know what's got de Barestan up in the air?"

The Baron looked at him closely. "Do you?" he asked.

There was no doubt that Lefumez was quite innocent of the cause of the notes. He was one of those peculiar young men who always live up to their expression of innocence. "No," he explained, "I know nothing, unless it is that my costume is a little too formal."

"You do look like a shop-walker over at the Louvre, on a White Sale," commented Cardan.

Lefumez regarded his two friends seriously. "If de Barestan isn't worrying about an affair of honour, that makes me ridiculous, with my morning coat and my black tie. My duelling costume. The Marquis should be more precise. I hate making myself conspicuous. At the same time one wants, always, to be properly dressed. Just the other night I was invited to a first communion dinner; well, naturally, I appeared properly dressed and it turned out to be a trick—a surprise party, where everyone was dressed in pyjamas. Pyjamas isn't exactly the word, for most of the guests were nudists and wanted to show their convictions."

"My poor Henry!" sympathized the Baron. "You evidently don't like the unexpected."

"I adore surprises," objected Lefumez, "when they warn me in advance, but I'm always getting into the worst situations with the best of intentions too. Now take last year, I had a charming little friend. We had much in common. Our tastes were similar, but she didn't care for me to come to her place without calling up in advance. So—one must humour the little dears—I always wrote her a letter to tell her I was coming on a certain afternoon or evening and later on followed up my letter with a telegram, and at the last minute I confirmed my telegram by a telephone call. One day I was in the deuce of a hurry and I didn't have time to go through my usual routine, so I popped in on her unannounced—without the long distance notification. And I found her, well—sleeping!"

"Ah," ejaculated Merignol.

"I found one of Prunier's delivery boys also asleep. But that wasn't the worst, it was the delivery johnny who was asleep and my little friend was lying there, eating oysters."

"One must keep up one's spirits, in the best of beds," commented the Baron. He took out his watch and looked at it perfunctorily. "If we had time I could tell you boys some of my amusing experiences."

"Let's go down to the bar," said Merignol impatiently, "and have a whisky while we're waiting for de Barestan."

"That's a corking idea," remarked the Baron. Lefumez was nervous. "You wish to go down to the bar?"

"Surely, why not?" asked Cardan.

Lefumez made a wry face. "I can't show myself in this rig," he lamented. "I'll make myself more than conspicuous—grotesque."

"Don't be ridiculous, Henry," Merignol observed.

The Baron smiled. "Come, come, what the devil does it matter! You will act as strong contrast in the midst of these poor devils here who are so apparently amusing themselves." He reached over and rang the bell.

"You're great fellows, you two! You forget that now, in France, they ridicule duelling."

"They just don't kill any more," the Baron explained. "Otherwise the literary *salons* and the Chamber of Deputies would have been changed into vast *morgues*."

Jasmin appeared in the doorway. "You gentlemen rang?"

"Jasmin," said the Baron, "we're going down to the bar to wait for the Marquis, it'll be a little gayer than up here. Let us know the moment he arrives."

"Yes, M. le Baron." Jasmin went out.

Lefumez jumped up. "Oh, head waiter," he ordered, "my coat. Oh, he's gone!"

"What's this?" protested Merignol. "You're going to leave?"

"Henry!" Cardan exclaimed. "You're going to abandon de Barستان?"

"Certainly not. But I can't go down dressed like this. One doesn't draw swords at the bar! I must put my coat on over this outfit."

The *maître d'hôtel* fortunately appeared at this moment. He held the coat up and M. Lefumez wriggled into it.

The Baron looked over at Lefumez affectionately.

"Ah, Henry," he said, "you are a queer one! I wonder if you're as long faced as you appear to be."

"My dear boy," Lefumez explained, "don't you understand, I hate making myself talked about, conspicuous, and at that, Cardan, conspicuous isn't the exact word. What I mean to convey is, I detest drawing attention to myself."

"I think we understand," said Merignol with a melancholy smile, as he got up and started out. "You wish to be as insignificant as possible."

Jasmin was at the telephone: "Allo! you in the wine cellar! Send me up two bottles of de Heidsieck Monopole for room number five. And send four magnums of any vintage, it doesn't matter, to the rich American in number eight. He wouldn't know the difference even if he were sober."

Baron Cardan stood in the doorway. "It's great to be a rich American," he mused, "a friend to the world at large—at considerable cost!"

IV

FOR the moment there was no one in room number five. Then the door at the right opened and a striking, youngish-looking woman in evening dress thrust her head in. It was Mme Simone Diaz. She was a symphony in Nile green and black onyz. She had those big round eyes, with thick lashes, the sort that impale men of the world like so many green plums on the blade of a sword. Her manner was quite at ease, like a volcano that wasn't erupting. Her nails were lacquered with rose geranium. Simone was the divorced wife of Rizzi Diaz, that illusive Bolivian who won the Epsom Derby with his horse, King Arthur, and lost a famous law suit in New York with one of the expensive dancers in M. Ziggy's Follies. Rizzi Diaz, of whom it was once said by a facetious reporter: "Rizzi Diaz, wins his races because his jockeys ride for him; he loses his breach-of-promise suits because he does his own jockeying!"

Simone was beautiful to behold, but like Italian wine, rather heady. A disturbing element, but pretentious. The fortune of Diaz having escaped her, she had successfully lassoed the Marquis de Barestan, who, for the passing moment, pleased her with his title and above all, gave her the opportunity to avenge

herself upon the tantalizing Billie, the Marquise, who meant to leave her husband no chance to be unfaithful.

"Waiter!" Simone cried out, as she struck the bell.

Jasmin bobbed up like the jack out of a box. "Madame?" he inquired solicitously.

Simone stamped a rather fetching foot. Jasmin, despite his age, didn't miss the gesture. Perhaps she might drop a garter! "The Marquis de Barestan, has he arrived?" she asked.

"No, Madame."

"Who was speaking just now in this room?"

"Three of his friends," the *maître d'hôtel* informed her.

"Where are they now?"

"They went down to the bar."

"To do what?" she demanded.

Jasmin patiently explained. "To drink some cocktails while they're waiting."

"As soon as M. de Barestan comes in; here, take this; tell him that I am waiting in number six."

"Quite so, Madame." He coughed discreetly. "Whom shall I say is here?"

Simone hesitated. "A lady."

"Oh, just a lady?"

"*Une dame*—that's all!" She disappeared into room number six.

Jasmin moved briskly about the table. "Oh, we swim in mystery," he informed the four walls, "first,

three men, one of them an undertaker's assistant. Then, a bang-up sleek-looking tigress. The plot of the party thickens."

V

THE Marquis de Barestan entered number five. He was of the dashing cavalier type, in his early forties; smartly dressed, with a carnation in his lapel. His manner was quite swanky and he spoke his French with a slow English accent, a trick he had contracted in a fifteen years' attendance at the bar at the Ritz.

"Good evening, Jasmin," the Marquis greeted.

"Ah! M. le Marquis!" Jasmin's professionally dumb expression relaxed for the moment into a grin. He took de Barestan's coat.

"My friends are late. I am the first?"

"Your friends waited for you in here, M. le Marquis, and then went down to the bar," Jasmin informed him.

"There were three of them?"

"Quite so, three. I will go and get them."

"Just a moment," de Barestan lowered his voice, "Jasmin, no one else has asked for me?"

"Yes," Jasmin admitted, "a lady."

"Good!"

Jasmin had evidently expected more of a comment.
“M. le Marquis understands?” he queried.

“Yes,” indifferently, “Where is she?”

Jasmin pointed. “There, in number six.”

“Excellent!” de Barestan commented. “Listen, Jasmin, don’t tell my friends down at the bar that I have arrived. You understand, not until I ring.”

“It is understood, M. le Marquis.”

“Don’t let me detain you.”

Jasmin came to with a start. “Anything I can get you, M. le Marquis?”

“Nothing! I’ll ring.”

Jasmin went out, his curiosity unsatisfied.

De Barestan opened the door of the room at the right and called: “Simone!”

She came in quickly and threw herself into her lover’s arms. “Ah, my dear,” she cooed, like the dove she was, when she wished to be.

De Barestan returned her embrace with interest. “My little Simone!” he ejaculated. “My little lovebird.”

“You’re starting off well.”

“I didn’t keep you waiting?” he asked.

“You did. I’m always unhappy when I’m away from you.”

This was a line that always fetched de Barestan. For Mme Simone Diaz could at times appear to be in dire need of male protection.

“My little bluebird!” de Barestan gurgled. “My

God, you're beautiful to-night, Simone!" "You resemble a lovely star that lights up the heavens."

Simone smiled indulgently. "Edmond, I've been very anxious since you sent me that precocious note this afternoon."

"Precocious!"

"Tell me," she went on, "why do you make yourself so mysterious here at this hour?"

"Zut! Don't you like the romantic, the fanciful?"

"In novels, yes. In real life it always finishes badly."

De Barestan feigned to be astonished. "And you don't find that this is original enough, this little setting here? Moonlight—jazz—passion—passionate mystery."

"Edmond, you will kill me with impatience—what is all this about? Something new with your wife?"

"No. She continues to live as impenetrable and as exasperating as usual."

His expression was choleric. Simone looked at him coolly.

"Then I don't understand," she protested. "You've just made a date with three of your old friends, it seems."

"To kill Billie," de Barestan explained. "To get rid of Billie," he corrected.

Simone shuddered. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, joking like that."

"My dear Simone, to-night here, decisive things are going to happen. I'm about to decide our happiness, heads or tails."

"You frighten me," she whispered.

De Barestan struck an heroic attitude.

"Simone, our situation is shaky. I have taken the resolution, all of a sudden, to go to the mat with destiny."

"Go to the mat?" she repeated.

"If you insist, fight it out with destiny. When I married Billie, four years ago, I was very much in love with her. After fifteen years of previous married experience, I found myself seduced by her virginal charm." He struck an attitude he judged to be slightly poetic. "So young!" he caroled, "so sprightly and well brought up. Just picture her."

"I have, too frequently," snapped Simone.

"An American girl, just twenty-one years old; a real young girl, not at all like the little fools who change their husbands like they change their shorts! In brief—a girl not too spoiled, brought up by the Puritans of Boston. What a change for a man fed up on the artificialities of femininity!"

"You're painting very well with your words this evening, look out!" Simone said in a bored voice.

"I am a man of feeling," protested de Barestan, "and a man of truth—when necessary. I thought I would love Billie for ever, that she would be an epilogue to my romance of sentimental adventures, only

—and there is the Senegambian in the wood-pile—I didn't realize I would ever meet you, Simone. That changed everything!"

"My lover!" she said serenely; another of her excellent tricks.

"You came into my married life like a ray of the sun into a room of sadness. I forgot all my good resolutions; I deceived Billie, discreetly at first, up to the time that we decided to belong to each other, exclusively, openly. It is a month or so ago since I told her that my love for her was leaving me little by little. That I proposed to divorce her. And she refused, as you know."

"Why?" Simone demanded. "I don't understand the reason that makes a woman cling to a man who doesn't love her any more." She looked sharply at de Barestan. "You don't love her any more, do you? Are you quite sure, Edmond?"

"If I didn't love you, would I be here to-night? Believe it or not, Simone, I've thought this all out, thoroughly. I put on one side, her refusal, on the other, our need for liberty, and I've decided to act in consequence."

"I ask you again," Simone implored, "did she give you a reason for not consenting to a divorce?"

"No," mused the Marquis, "but I know the reason. She wishes to remain the Marquise de Barestan. It is, my dear, an old American custom—title bagging!"

"An American who doesn't wish to be divorced; shades of Reno, I never heard of one before!"

"Well," he admitted, "it had to be I who married the exception to the rule."

"Have you offered her money?"

De Barestan snorted. "Don't be funny," he said, "she is worth eighty millions and I, eighty postage stamps!"

Simone shrugged her pretty shoulders. "Then why all this obstinacy?" she asked.

"She wishes to revenge herself. Her vanity is wounded, over having been discarded for a more charming woman."

"Thanks," she accepted.

"*Voilà!* She won't give me my liberty merely because she wishes to embarrass me."

"Embarrass us," Simone corrected. "Ah, these little bugs of Boston! It's a pity she hasn't desire enough to cheat you in return."

De Barestan paced up and down.

"If she has that desire, she hasn't gone as far yet."

"She's only anxious to mock you; to defy me."

De Barestan bristled.

"That's what I won't tolerate! I won't admit that a woman, whom I love no longer, can prevent me from openly loving the one whom I prefer to her. In the battle for love, the weak are vanquished. My dear, it is the survival of the fittest, and we are the fittest."

"I'm so happy when I hear you talk that way,"

Simone said wheedlingly. "Edmond, you are all my joy of living, you must sense that! Since I met you, and we've loved each other, I've forgotten all my mistakes, all the miseries in the past. My marriage with Rizzi—my divorce—my loneliness. You don't know what terrible memories you have wiped away with your love."

De Barestan took her gently in his arms.

"Simone, you'll never regret? You know, I'm not very rich."

"You're wonderful," she said wooingly. "You have an historical name. Above all, I love you, no—you love me, and that is sufficient."

He released her for a moment and regarded her tenderly.

"There is time yet to retreat before we cross the moat, because to-night I'm going to put the final bar between Billie and myself."

"You're going to leave her?" she asked excitedly.
"You're going to break off?"

She came close.

"One breaks off a liaison," he commented in a worldly fashion. "One doesn't break off a marriage just because one's wife refuses a divorce."

"Then?" Simone asked.

"I'm going to try to tempt Billie."

"What do you mean, tempt her?"

"Since we were married, my young and saintly wife has been rigorously faithful to me. There was

nothing at all that I could reproach her with. She stood stoically for my deceiving her and her vengeance is not to revenge herself at all. It is beastly!"

Simone corrected him.

"No—it is American!"

"Up to the present," he said dolefully, "she has resisted temptation, but I think I've discovered the weak link of this transatlantic Amazon."

"What is it?"

"I can't tell you yet. I'm still afraid to chance breaking it. Let's touch wood, both of us." He seized a knife on the table.

"No, no, not the knife, the handle is horn."

"So much the better. I accept the omen."

"But I don't understand you," she said, perplexed. De Barestan grinned reassuringly.

"I'm going to try to trip my wife—the smart little party. Our happiness is at stake. I'm not such a fool. Let me work it out. I will have my divorce."

"Don't say that; touch wood!" She reached over and selected a match and handed it to him. "Here."

"You hand me a burned match. Don't worry, my dear, soon we shall be free. I will break the marriage chains which were an error and gain the right to love you openly."

Simone wished to know more about his plan.

"But how do you hope to do that?"

De Barestan led her over to the door of the adjoining room.

"I'll explain that later. The partitions between these rooms are so thin, you can hear almost everything. It is high time I met my friends."

Simone refused to be dismissed.

"Take my hands," she implored, "they are burning with fever."

De Barestan tried to reassure her. "I'm excited myself. Now you stay in the room. I promise I won't leave without telling you how things are going. I shall ring for Jasmin."

He did so.

"I'm going to wait as attentively as I do at my dentist's."

"While I painlessly extract Billie's obstinacy! Run away, quickly!"

Simone was in the doorway.

"Edmond!"

She held out her arms.

"Simone!"

They embraced passionately.

Downstairs "Jack and his Boys" started their whoopee of love with their saxophones and trumpets muffled with straw hats. Simone went out with a hesitating step. The Marquis closed the door and wiped off some rouge which she had left on his lips.

Jasmin peered in at the door.

"M. le Marquis rang?"

"Tell my friends that I have arrived. And you might bring them up here."

VI

JASMIN ushered in Baron Cardan and M._s Merignol. The funereal-looking Lefumez followed.

"Good evening, Henry," de Barestan greeted sprightly. "How are you, Cardan. Hello, Merignol. You'll excuse me for keeping you waiting."

Lefumez was as formal as his appearance.

"My dear de Barestan," he drawled, "you're quite excusable." He put his arm about de Barestan's shoulders.

Cardan spoke.

"Edmond—you know you can count upon me!"

Melodramatically he grasped the Marquis's hands.

"My dear friend," Merignol grandiosely said, "we are with you, heart to heart."

De Barestan was somewhat astonished.

"Why all this solemnity? You have the air of escorting the devil to earth."

"If your honour is at stake, count upon me," explained Lefumez in a sepulchral tone.

The Baron put himself in duelling position.

"Revolvers at ten metres."

"This is very affecting indeed," chuckled the Marquis. He had eyes only for the ultra-formally dressed Lefumez. "Henry, you're in a frock coat,

already disguised for a second in a duel. Let me laugh.
This mistake is charming."

"There isn't to be a duel?" queried Lefumez.

"Haven't you been slapped in the face?" demanded the Baron.

"No, my friends. My honour is quite safe. I haven't had any disagreements to-day, just a word or so with the telephone girl."

"Yes," sympathized the Baron, "what execrable service!"

"Ah, I breathe again," sighed Merignol.

"And you, Henry," de Barestan went on, "you are too wonderful! I am afraid I embarrass you."

"I beg of you, Edmond," Lefumez implored in a hollow voice, "you pour fire on the wound. No, you pour salt in the wound. I feel ridiculous!"

"Come down to earth and shut up," said Cardan.

"Then, de Barestan, will you tell us why you sent for us?" asked Merignol.

"In a minute," temporized the Marquis. "I'll ring for Jasmin to bring the champagne. . . . I sent for you, my good friends, so that good fellowship would be the order of the evening."

"Only I am hardly in shape for that," remarked Lefumez.

The Baron went into a fit of coughing. Merignol started to say a word.

"Lefumez has the right to come dressed as Adam, if he feels that way," urged de Barestan.

"Fig leaves are hard to find," sighed Cardan.

"In your notes," Lefumez protested to de Barestan, "you did say it was a grave affair."

Jasmin entered.

"The champagne, M. le Marquis?"

"Serve it, Jasmin," directed de Barestan, "and let us hope it is as dry as a modern preacher."

"Impossible, sir!" mumbled Jasmin as he filled the glasses.

"Now explain yourself," admonished Merignol.

"We're going to amuse ourselves to-night," began de Barestan, "I guarantee you that."

"Edmond, I absolutely demand that you excuse me for half an hour to go home."

"To do what?" asked de Barestan, surprised.

"To change."

The Baron clapped.

"He'll probably come back as Moses in the bulrushes!"

"Henry, you're crazy," de Barestan said amiably, "what the devil have clothes to do with it, if you get drunk."

He raised his glass.

"Tchin! Tchin! my dear old pals. Life is sweet. A toast to the Four Musketeers!"

They drank.

Henry looked as if he were toasting the Four Horsemen!

"In this jovial atmosphere," de Barestan repeated,

"I wish to tell you, my dear fellows, the object of the meeting."

"Ah!"

"Oh!"

"At last!"

"It is a farewell meeting," de Barestan began.

"You're to take the veil . . . a Benedictine?" asked Merignol.

"No, I am leaving Paris for four months—leaving France!"

"Are you and Billie going back to a Boston tea-party?" boomed Cardan.

"I'm going to Morocco! One chance in a thousand—a wonderful opportunity to drill for oil. I alone can negotiate for it on the spot."

"Look out those Moroccans don't put you on the spot," warned Cardan.

For once Lefumez was not long-faced. "You're going to take your charming little wife? That will be jolly!"

"No. Billie cannot follow me into the desert wastes. I am obliged to leave her here."

The Marquis did not look sorrowful.

Cardan grinned.

"Then you've actually brought us together to celebrate? You've relieved me! With all this mystery and 'come at once' notes, I thought it was serious. Edmond. . . . The best luck in the world."

"It is not for that alone that I brought you three here. It is to speak about Billie."

Merignol almost jumped out of his chair.

"What!"

"Before absenting myself from France I would like, as was the custom of the Quakers in the last century, to confide my wife to a proven friend. Fortunately, I have three true friends who merit my confidence."

He dramatically waved his hand about the table.

"Henry Lefumez! Victor Merignol! Baron Cardan! It is among these three good pals that I wish to choose the one to whom I will entrust my wife."

There was an abrupt silence. Cardan was the first to speak.

"What the devil! Entrust your wife?"

"Confide her to what, from whom?" asked the perplexed Merignol.

"I'm going to reveal to you three a grave subject. I'm going to trust to your discretion. Give me your word of honour that I can count on your silence and co-operation."

"You have my word."

"Count on my discretion."

"We swear it to you, Edmond."

"Perfect! My friends, here is the situation in few words. I wish to be divorced, because——"

"You, Edmond?"

"Divorce!"

"From the admirable Billie?"

De Barestan completed his sentence, "because I love another woman."

"Why make such a fuss about that?" Cardan asked, without smiling.

"You never told us a word of this," Lefumez protested.

"Henry," de Barestan explained, "one gets tired of wives like one gets tired of clothes. You can't carry around the same thing all your life. Variety will always be popular. Unfortunately, Billie doesn't wish to be divorced."

"Why not?" asked the Baron.

"It is her manner of revenging herself. She knows that I've cheated her——"

Cardan grinned. "Every wife knows that about every husband."

"But Billie is an American girl," de Barestan replied.

"I suppose that is different," Merignol said.

"Billie knows that I would like to marry my mistress. So, she refuses to release me. Since it is she who holds the purse-strings, I find myself between the devil and the deep sea! I cannot purchase my liberty by offering her a neat indemnity."

Merignol nodded sympathetically.

"What do you propose to do?"

"You three are my most loyal friends. I come to you in this moment of perplexity. I wouldn't dream of speaking to anyone else."

"Why do anything at all?" mused the Baron.
"No, what I meant was, what do you want us to do?"

"To deceive me with Billie!" answered de Barestan.

"Deceive?"

"You?"

"With Billie!"

"Tut! Tut! Such an air, you three! It is done every day, among the best of friends. I demand of one of you a loyal service and I hope you're not going to leave me in the lurch. Now take you, Merignol! You come of a race of good, stout, Newfoundland dogs, who instantly jump in to rescue people who are drowning! You, Lefumez, you're the scrupulous type, a statue of propriety mounted on two legs. You are precise, conscientious, a slave to Duty."

Lefumez held his hand up in protest. De Barestan went on.

"For years I've observed your life closely. You may have a line, a subtle line with a hook on it, but I doubt it. You've graduated from your pin-feathers. You are now perfect! So if I asked you to make me into a cuckold, a deceived hubby——"

Lefumez was at a loss for the exact word!

De Barestan turned to Cardan.

"You're the perfect Don Juan, born out of the quiver of Eros! I can picture you distracting Billie with a recital of your flirtations, your feminine scalps! Cardan, you ought to interest charming women like a last bridge under which many waters had flowed.

Don't defend yourself, men who have loved a great deal are museums that women like to visit."

"My dear Edmond," suggested Merignol, "wouldn't it be better if all of us would tempt your fascinating little wife to eat the apple of Eden?"

"Emphatically, no! I invited you three so that I might find at least one brave volunteer."

"The Fatherland is in danger—one brave volunteer is needed to go to the front!" ballyhooed Cardan.

"Don't you find my idea logical?" demanded de Barestan. "In cases of this kind, one is never better served than by an intimate friend. Of course, there is the well-established routine, to consult a private inquiry agent, who tries valiantly to impersonate a man of the world for two hundred louis. No, thank you, I prefer to trust myself to a loyal comrade. It is much more comforting, especially if he succeeds. Look here, Merignol, aren't you going to volunteer?"

"It is an extremely delicate affair," Merignol confided. "After all, I'm afraid I haven't the *deft flair!*"

Lefumez waved a languid hand.

"It is more than delicate, that isn't the word, it is intricate."

A smile decorated de Barestan's face.

"Then you volunteer?"

"My dear Edmond, put yourself in my place. You would hesitate. You would ask yourself if it were proper to conduct yourself so—even if it were in commanded service."

De Barestan gave a shrug of impatience.

"And you, Cardan?"

Cardan shook his head in protest.

"I always say, make way for the youngsters, power before experience. I'm not passing the buck, really. It is an affair that demands youth."

"Since I can't find any volunteers," the Marquis said sardonically, "then I think it's best that I proceed by the way of a lottery."

"Good! Leave it to the Great God Luck!" cried the Baron.

"Yes. Drawing straws?" asked de Barestan, looking round the table.

"That would be a practical method," observed Merignol. "But there are other ways than straws."

"Surely," acknowledged de Barestan. "I have an idea!"

He rang.

"I'm for drawing straws," the Baron said, as though he feared there were some other method more hazardous.

Jasmin opened the door.

"M. le Marquis rang?"

"Bring me a zanzi. And three small sheets of paper," ordered de Barestan. "And, Jasmin, bring some more champagne."

Jasmin forgot himself; he looked astonished.

"A zanzi?"

"Yes. A poker set."

"Surely you have one," exclaimed the Baron.

The *maitre d'hôtel* was confused.

"I—I think we have, M. le Baron. I will go and see. Perhaps in the chauffeurs' bar."

"What the thunder did you ask of the head waiter?" queried Lefumez.

"Poker dice. Where have you been all these years?" asked the Marquis.

"Oh," replied Lefumez, "my American cousin taught me to play poker. It was expensive!"

"Then you know that aces are high. You mean to say you've never played it with dice?"

"Ah, that game that they play on the zinc, down in those funny little cafés where they carry wood and coal as a sideline. I never get around very much."

Jasmin came in. "Here is the zanzi you asked for, M. le Marquis."

"Put it down there. Now here's what we're going to do."

The Baron coughed insinuatingly.

"Wasn't there some mention of the preliminary—more champagne?"

"I'm bringing it in," said Jasmin, at the door.

"I'm going to write your names on the three sheets of paper," de Barestan explained. "Meantime you play with the dice until there is only one of you left—understand?" He sat down on the end of the table and began scribbling on the bits of paper. Cardan's eyebrows lifted slightly.

"Excellent! I begin," Merignol announced.

Lefumez peered over Merignol's shoulder.

"How do you play this game?"

"I shake the dice in the box," illustrated Merignol.

"I throw them out at an angle of forty-five degrees on the table-cloth. *Voilà!* I threw a pair of ladies! I again agitate the dice—the three that remain. See! another lady, that gives me three of a kind in two throws. Try your luck, Cardan."

The Baron chatted pleasantly as he shook the dice.

"In 1895 I won a bicycle with this game. Good—a pair of kings! During the war I won a full kilo of real sugar! Come on, little dears, remember your papa! As those black Americans say when they roll these little galloping squares."

He cast the dice.

"Another king! Not so good! Not so bad, three kings in two throws. You have a try, Henry."

Lefumez took up the dice. "I don't think I like it very much. I feel as if the sword of Damocles were suspended over my head by a single hair."

Cardan glared at Lefumez. "Go on and play and stop quoting poetry."

Lefumez drained the champagne in his glass, shook the dice, mumbled some invocations and cast them.

"What did I get? A valet! A king! That is a king, that one, isn't it, or is it a lady? I'm near-sighted."

The Baron snorted.

"Look at the under-garments and find out."

He screwed a monocle in his eye and looked closely. Lefumez paid no attention to Cardan's admonition.

"No, it's a valet! Twins!"

"Go on," said Merignol patiently, "a pair of valets."

Lefumez shook the dice box determinedly.

"When I was a little fellow——" he began.

"Play! Throw the dice!" Cardan said, "we haven't time to listen to the story of your life."

"It's true," related Lefumez. "When my father gave a card party, I faced about so that I wouldn't see the turning of a king."

"Or the laying of a queen," said the irrepressible Cardan.

"I was only eighteen when——" Lefumez saw Merignol glowering and threw the dice, turning his head away. "Tell me, what did I throw?"

"Ah—no more valets! That's good. You have one pair," said the Baron, taking up the dice immediately.

He looked over at de Barestan and winked. Lefumez smiled with relief.

"Then, Cardan, you're going to take charge of the fair Billie?"

"Not at all," said de Barestan, "Cardan has won the privilege of drawing the name of the volunteer. Here are the three pieces of paper. I'll mix them up, so it'll be quite fair. Choose, Cardan."

A querying murmur came from Merignol.

"You ought to put them in a hat. Lefumez has one that looks like a waste-paper basket."

He reached over, took up Lefumez's hat, and extended it to the Marquis, who threw in the pieces of paper. De Barestan shook the hat.

"I swear that all this gives me palpitation of the heart—frankly, I don't like it," averred Lefumez.

"Shut up," snapped the Baron, "keep your eye on me, I'm going to draw."

Lefumez had his fingers on his pulse.

"I'll bet that I've got a temperature of over a hundred."

But the Baron was reading the slip that he had drawn.

"Ah—Henry Lefumez!"

Lefumez jumped as though he'd been served with his *lettre-de-cachet*.

"What!" he shrilled.

"A ring-side seat for Lefumez," said Merignol smiling.

"A whole row of seats!" guffawed Cardan.

In mock ceremony he went around the table, assisted Lefumez to his feet and conducted him to the sofa. Lefumez sank down, crushed.

The Marquis went over and shook Lefumez's hand.

"Henry, my boy, I confide my wife to you. Do your duty to the end."

VII

LEFUMEZ got up from the sofa. He looked as if he were about to be led to the guillotine. He gazed sadly at Cardan and Merignol and then centred his glance on the Marquis.

"Edmond," he said in a before-death voice. "Before God and before all men, on that which I hold most dear——"

"On his wine cellar!" Cardan cut in.

"I swear to you that I will let no obstacle stand in my way to obtain for you your divorce."

He attempted, from memory, to reproduce Sidney Carton's attitude in "*A Tale of Two Cities*."

"I am sure I will not lose my head."

"That you will be courageous goes without saying," answered de Barestan, without a smile.

"I take this formal promise," Lefumez went on, "in front of our two friends, who are my witnesses and whom I authorize to kill me in duel if, on your return, I have not made you a deceived husband."

De Barestan laughed.

"To kill you in a duel, that's rich!"

"I mean to say that I authorize them to reproach me severely, in any manner they may see fit. But don't worry, Edmond, your wife will be in good hands." His voice choked him. "In good hands—

in honest hands. Believe me, old friend, I will cheat you loyally."

"All right, Henry, go to it," said the Marquis.

No one could keep the Baron quiet.

"Henry," he asked solicitously, "would you like to make your will?"

"You may all joke"—Lefumez looked at the three of them—"but this is an excessively serious affair—agreeing to trip the wife of your best friend! I didn't seek the selection, but since Fate, in the form of the dice and those miserable little pieces of paper, chose me, I——"

There was a sudden rap at the door.

De Barestan called out:

"Come in!"

Jasmin lowered his voice prudently.

"M. le Marquis, a lady is asking if you have arrived."

De Barestan waved his hand.

"Show her up here," he ordered.

Cardan's interest was immediately piqued.

"You've made a date with a woman, here, tonight?"

"Surely, with my wife."

Lefumez suddenly became very excited.

"No! no!" he implored, "I must go and change my clothes. I am dressed for a duel, not for a seduction. I absolutely refuse to appear in this disguise in front of the woman that I'm going to draw aside

from the path of rectitude and duty. Edmond, I am grotesque. I appeal to you, Cardan and Merignol. Would any woman surrender her chastity to a man as formally dressed as I am?"

"Henry," observed de Barestan, "grotesque is not exactly the word. My boy, you're charming by contrast. Women have been enticed by gentlemen in all sorts of rigs, but I doubt if anyone has been tempted from the narrow path by an undertaker's assistant! It will be a novelty!"

"It may catch them unawares!" added Merignol.

"My dear friends," continued the Marquis, "a last recommendation. It is well understood between all of us that Billie is not to learn of our little plot. All she is to know is that Henry will bear her company during my absence in Morocco. I leave my wife to my most trustworthy friend. It is all quite natural. Listen, Henry, if Billie says to you: 'My dear, are you by my side to make love to me?' you reply, the most innocent in the world: 'Why, what an idea!' Because you'll never succeed with that girl unless you hide your game from her eyes. Put on your gloves, as we say, and take your time."

Lefumez saluted.

"I understand fully, Edmond. I think I have just the right line in mind to accomplish the purpose without her knowing it."

VIII

THE Marquise de Barestan—Billie—entered. She was a decided blonde; winsome, with her hair dressed à la Titus. Irreproachable breasts concealed themselves modestly under an attractive *décolleté*, closed with an emerald clasp worthy of the Maharajah of Patialia. Billie upset all traditions and overthrew most European chroniclers who saw in all Americans a cascade of multi-millionaires, drunk as early as five o'clock in the afternoon, specialists in front-page divorces.

She was subtle and light in her movements. Her wrists were clearly aristocratic, her ankles of an irreproachable slenderness. Her great eyes of the colour of ripe chestnuts. Her thick, long lashes were black. An allurement which had gained for her, since her arrival in France, a pet name, bestowed upon her by a popular journalist, a name that she carried about with an elegant swagger: “The Dear with the Come Hither Eyes!” One old rake, famous for his parphrases, transposed this to: “The Peach with the Bedroom Eyes!” and sometimes substituted another word for “Peach!”

In truth, Billie was a ravishing creation. She had the vivacity and grace of a young goddess of the forests. But also in the shyness of her look there was

a sort of perversity at once close and distant, which confused the audacious and kept off the social billy-goats.

The Marquise had a taste for the romantic, like many of her transatlantic sisters. Raised in the stone jungles of the skyscrapers, which add sophistication to the technique of the *femme tigre*, they find in Romance a secret outlet of the spirit, a subconscious reaction against the scene in which they evolve. An atmosphere, incidentally, which did not inspire "Les Nuits" nor "On ne badine pas avec l'Amour."

Severely raised in Boston by a proper-minded family, Billie was given a certain amount of liberty, but not enough to lead her into danger. She fell in love with the Marquis de Barestan and continued to love him up to the day he deceived her, whereupon her passion fell to zero. And on the night that she found out the failure of her marriage, she took back to Cartier's a cigarette-case studded with brilliants which she had intended for her husband. She returned the case and sent a cheque for fifty thousand francs to the secretary of the society for the prevention of cruelty to stray dogs.

Billie was sweet, deliciously real, unaffected, but she had much of the viewpoint of the descendants of the first colonists who stepped on to Plymouth Rock from the *Mayflower*. She spoke almost correct French, which she sprinkled with slang. She fitted exactly the description which de Barestan gave her in

the happy days of their early love : " My wife, she is a hot buttered roll in a cake of ice, that fairly makes your teeth ache."

The Marquis got up and kissed Billie's hand.

" Good evening, Billie," he said, a trifle unsure of himself, " we were waiting for you, my dear."

Billie beamed good-naturedly upon the four men.

" Hello, Edmond," she exclaimed. " Hello, boys ! " What a funny idea, this rendezvous."

The three friends rushed forward to kiss her hand. Billie smiled upon them indulgently.

" See who's here ! " she said, taking in Lefumez and his sombre costume.

She peered about the room.

" Where is the corpse ? Don't tell me it isn't a funeral ! "

Lefumez was embarrassed.

" Didn't I tell you ? " he said to Merignol. " I'm going to become the joke of the evening, the butt of all your humour."

" I am so sorry," pleaded Billie, with her sunniest smile.

Lefumez tried to shrink into a corner.

" I am literally floored that you should see me in this costume. It is your husband's fault."

Billie tried to be serious. Lefumez's manner was as formal as his clothes.

" Henry, you should get up on a soap-box and speak in Hyde Park. You would go over big in

London! Someone would be sure to listen to you, fog or no fog."

Lefumez sputtered.

"I'm—I'm mad as the devil."

De Barestan took a hand.

"Billie," he cautioned, "you're going it a bit strong with poor old Henry. You seem unusually yourself! You must have been drinking champagne! You know what that does to you Americans."

"Not guilty. Just a glass of orangeade," admitted Billie. "But tell me, Edmond, why have you brought your three best friends together and why did you get Henry to dress up like the secretary of a graveyard?"

Lefumez tried to efface himself by getting behind the plump Merignol. De Barestan beamed with rare humour.

"Henry always takes things literally, let him alone. We are here to-night, darling, in your honour."

Cardan jumped as if he'd been poked with a rapier.

"What! You haven't told Billie the real reason for——"

The Marquise was quick to take him up.

"Of all the people in France, my dear Baron, I would be the last to be informed of the traipsings and adventures of my husband."

"Oh," said de Barestan guiltily.

"Seriously, didn't he inform you of——"

Merignol tried to muscle in.

"Edmond is a husband, not a pal. When he wines

and dines with his friends," Billie declared, "I hear of it by reading the news about-town in the *New York Herald*, and if he stays out all night with the rowdies and rounders of the rue Blanche, I should only know it by looking over the lost and found dog column in the *Chicago Tribune*."

Then she turned to Lefumez.

"I see you, Henry, behind roly-poly Merignol and I'd like to ask you, what are you thinking about? You do sometimes tell the truth!"

"I—well, I don't find the exact word, dear lady," Lefumez floundered.

De Barestan waved the subject of Lefumez aside.

"Since I dislike to keep secrets from my friends, I'm going to speak right out, Billie. You've had your little wisecracks about me. All right, you have your motive! I brought you three loyal fellows together to-night to choose the one to whom I would entrust you with while I'm away on my trip to Morocco."

"Entrust me!" Billie said, bristling. "You speak as if I were in need of a nurse."

"All wives are when their husbands go away," answered the Marquis. "It would bother me considerably to know that you were all alone, like some abandoned bird."

"Your solicitation is touching," commented Billie ironically.

But de Barestan was not to be stopped.

"In your first New England colonies, when a bus-

band went away, he confided his wife to the sacred custody of his best friend. So I thought, my dear, that it was best to select a loyal friend with whom you can keep company, if you prefer to put it that way, during my absence."

"Are you joking?" Billie asked pointedly. "If you aren't, all I can say is your gallantry throws me into a flutter."

"Edmond's quite serious," said Cardan. "You can't guess who will have the care of you, Marquise."

"Which one of we three?" chipped in Merignol.

"Chut!" said de Barestan, as if the brave volunteer hadn't been selected. "Let me put this delicate matter on an entirely personal basis. Listen, Billie, your guardian will be elected by destiny, of course; it will be one of these three friends. Just between you and Father Chance, which one would you personally prefer?"

"Since you insist, Edmond, on playing this game—all three of them! You know we say in America: 'There's safety in numbers.' I've always said that when a woman is courted by three or four men, she is quite sure to remain alone—when she should be alone!"

De Barestan winked at his friends.

"No, you shall have only one! Is it Cardan who has gained the right to coquette with you?" he asked.

"This word 'coquette,'" Billie remarked dryly— suspiciously. "Do you mean that my sentinel is going

to merely flirt with me while you're in Morocco or that he's going to give you just cause to return and cross swords with him?"

"In that case," Baron Cardan observed, "you may reassure yourself, dear friend, that the kind who would have the right taste to qualify would certainly be younger than I am."

Billie smiled derisively, as though she smelt a mouse somewhere in Denmark! Oh, that schemer husband of hers!

"But, my dear Baron, your company has a certain charm. May I add, a certain security. Gentlemen who insist that they're worn out are like cigars that have gone out. You never should relight them!"

"Billie, I'm not going to keep you in suspense any longer," said the Marquis. "Kismet has chosen Lefumez. Henry is the lucky chap!"

"All right," assented Billie, "your friend Henry shall be the guardian of my body."

De Barestan, whose middle name was suspicion, sensed there was relief in her tone. He smiled.

Lefumez excitedly approached Billie.

"Look here—I protest—about this guardian of your body business."

"Come, come," exclaimed the Marquis, "then it is settled, Billie?"

"Settled? Why, the game has just begun," Billie retorted gaily.

"No, no!" snapped her husband, beginning to

have doubts. "I mean you to accept Henry as a chaperon?"

Billie, as though she were playing a part, curtsied.

"I am a dutiful wife," she adjured, "since it is your good pleasure, milord, I accept."

Lefumez was not to be outdone in playing a part, only he probably was more sincere in his lines. He bowed profoundly.

"Don't put yourself out, you know. If my society is going to be a contra-irritant or if you judge me unworthy of——"

Billie interrupted.

"Don't worry, Henry. In that case, I would bounce you like an old golf-ball."

"May I make a suggestion, Henry," said de Barestan. "Familiarize yourself, my boy, with your task. I'll leave you alone with Billie for ten minutes."

De Barestan started towards the door, motioning to Cardan and Merignol. Lefumez looked as if he'd like to follow. He certainly was not at ease.

Merignol, on the threshold, turned.

"See you later, Guardian of Miss Stars and Stripes!"

IX

THEY were alone, Billie and Lefumez.

"Here we are," said Lefumez nervously, as he played idly with the dice box. He cast them mechanically.

Three aces!

Billie twinkled.

"The first thing to do," she suggested, "is to order some cocktails. Will you ring?"

Jasmin was at the door.

"You rang?" he asked.

"Yes. Jasmin, bring in immediately two excellent cocktails," ordered Lefumez.

"Bring in the shaker," corrected Billie.

Jasmin, surprised, nodded and closed the door.

"Ripping!" said Lefumez. "This is jolly."

"It certainly is quite a joke."

"Isn't it, dear Marquise?"

Her enjoyment of the affair was indicated by her expression.

"Really, my dear Henry, my husband is up to his tricks or a little cuckoo—or both! You don't mind my speaking frankly do you?"

Lefumez waved his hand sympathetically.

"My dear Marquise! It is the only way between us: and yet frankness is not the exact word."

Billie's smile spread to the corners of her lovely mouth.

"No," she acknowledged, "the affair will need perhaps more than frankness."

When Jasmin had brought in the cocktail-shaker, placed it on the table with glasses, and had quietly effaced himself, Lefumez continued the conversation.

"Permit me, dear Marquise," he said as he poured two cocktails. "May I drink to you the toast of Paris!"

"It's a good thing you didn't say Berlin! The toast is apt to be a little bit burnt there!"

"I never liked German cooking," Lefumez replied without smiling.

"Henry! Don't try to be so English!"

They drank.

"Truthfully," asked Lefumez, "didn't you have some sort of warning of Edmond's plan?"

"You mean his departure for Morocco?" she asked almost savagely. "Oh, yes. But this comedy—no. As if it were necessary to confide me to the guardianship of one of his best friends!"

"It does sound absurd, as you put it."

"Henry, absurd is not the word." She became diplomatic. "Of course, Edmond did speak to me of some jolly little surprise. Which turns out to be you!"

"*Voilà!*—here I am. I've never been called a surprise, big or little. Do I embarrass you?"

"No," said Billie, "I just find the whole situation

suspic—ridiculous. For you, as well as for me.”

“ Is ridiculous just the word? ”

“ My little Lefumez, I don’t bother about the words—the meaning is all that concerns me.” She forgot her doubts for a moment. “ I do find it a little humiliating that my husband has to give me a guardian, since he takes such liberties himself.”

Lefumez lifted his cocktail glass, his hands were trembling.

“ Then, I do not please you, dear friend? ”

“ That has nothing to do with it,” explained Billie.

“ I don’t seem sympathetic to you? ”

“ Of course you do,” Billie reassured him, “ you are a charming boy. But somehow this grates on my nerves and my teeth and everything. It isn’t you, personally, it’s the situation. I don’t know what to make of it! ”

Lefumez was like a child. He cut in disappointedly:

“ Then, I do bother you. I don’t please—don’t—”

“ No—yes. What I mean to say is——”

“ Then I irritate you? ”

“ Certainly not.”

“ Then I give you the fidgets? ”

Billie finished her cocktail. From her chair she surveyed Lefumez leisurely. Could he live in Paris and be so innocent?

“ You’ll give me the heebie-jeebies if you go on that way,” she told him. “ Listen, Lefumez, you embarrass

me, always the technical word! Among the pals of my husband, frankly, I like you the best. There, understand that—good!"

Lefumez was shrewd enough to realize that Billie might be leading him on. His experience with charming virginal-minded women—Americans—was limited. So much the better, he would start on this odd adventure with a clean slate.

"Call me Henry," he suggested.

"What sticks in the back of my mind," opined Billie, more to herself than to Lefumez, "is that the whole scheme is Edmond's. He wears himself out laying plots for me, like hidden mines. He's always been that way, for ever putting his foot into whatever I wish to do. Now this climax, this chaperonage, like a jack out of the pack! It naturally astonishes me. I smile, but I'm really quite—quite angry." She beamed. "The smile is for you, the anger for Edmond."

"That's jolly, thanks," said Lefumez. "Then why worry about it, my dear Marquise, since I am the one who is to play the rôle of chaperon over you."

Billie was piqued.

"This is the way I'm being paid in France," she mused, "for being a dutiful wife—pure and unapproachable. Oh, God! Oh, Goddam!"

Lefumez wished he had courage enough to reach over and pat her hand. He tried to put his sentiment into his words.

"My poor little friend," he sympathized, "but really, Edmond is an excellent old chap! You're too—too severe. I know him well enough to assure you——"

Billie cut in ironically:

"One man who pretends to understand another man! Laugh that off!"

"He's a good husband and he loves you."

"A good husband! Listen to me, dear little Lemcz, since it is in the cards that you and I are to become very close friends, I'm going to tell you the truth without frills. Edmond cheats me like a pig and has been doing so for a long time."

Henry tried to appear unconvinced.

"You will have to prove that to me."

"Don't be ridiculous, Henry. He even owned up to it."

"What! He told you, his wife?"

"Over the telephone, yes."

"How, over the telephone? . . . Though, now I come to think of it, that's an excellent idea."

"Yes, each time he was with that baby doll of his at Passy 28-85. I answered thinking it was my dress-maker. I could kill myself for my stupidity, for I heard his mocking voice saying: 'Billie, I'm with my mistress, in her apartment. Do you wish to verify this? The key is in the door—on the outside!' Then I hung up the receiver. And every time he caught me long enough to have his little speech—and chuckle!"

"Oh," Lefumez commented quite sincerely, "he never mentioned tricks of that kind to me."

"Then—you, Cardan, and Merignol, his three best friends, you were the only ones who didn't know! Look here, what has occurred here to-night puts me on my guard. The whole thing seems like a plot . . . a plant. Henry, you wouldn't lie to me . . . would you?" she suddenly asked.

"Lie! Under no circumstances, Billie, since I couldn't get away with it. I'm not a very good actor."

"Tell me, why were you selected as my sentinel?"

"I?"

"Yes, you! . . . Don't look so innocent!"

"It was a matter of pure luck. Edmond had nothing to do with it."

"Luck? . . . What sort of luck?"

"We played zanzi."

"You played what?"

"Zanzi, you know. . . . Poker dice! Those funny little cubes of bone."

"I'm not a fool. I know what dice are."

"Then you must know something about zanzi. Watch—you take this little box with the five dice in it. You throw the little ivories at an angle of forty-five degrees, here on the table cloth. Wait—being careful to first turn the little box about like the hands on a watch. Then you say something: 'Papa needs a new top hat!' And then you throw a pair!" He peered over the dice. "Only I didn't! Three kings

would have been a *carré*. Two queenies a *brelan!*
Let me see, is that correct?"

"Yes, yes," Billie stopped him impatiently, "you've got the thing upside down. But what actually happened?"

"Cardan won at the dice."

"But I thought you were the one."

"You don't understand. The winner at dice was the one who drew out of the hat the name of the friend to whom you were to be confided."

Billie threw up her hand in protest. "That sounds so complicated. Where were the names?"

"On three small pieces of folded paper."

"And they were put in—"

"In the waste-paper basket."

Billie laughed. "That hat of yours?"

Lefumez jumped up. "Those pieces of paper ought to be here yet. Come, I'll show you."

He began searching the floor for the crumpled bits of paper. "Here they are," he cried out, "all three."

"Let me see them," ordered Billie, "the first one—which is marked Henry Lefumez."

Lefumez nodded.

"The one that Cardan picked out of the hat, surely. The one that made me the winner." He went on with his explanation. "The second carried the name of Cardan and the third, Merignol."

Billie opened the first paper.

"That's yours, Henry Lefumez."

She opened the second.

"I thought so. This one is also Henry Lefumez!"

"What do you say?" asked Lefumez, astonished.

Billie passed him the two slips of paper.

"Read them yourself, my friend."

"It is true! Well, I'll be damned!"

"And I only want one guess as to whose name is on the third piece."

She handed it across to him. "Open it, I am sure you'll find your name written there."

Lefumez took the proffered third piece as though it were a Chicago pineapple about to go off. He opened it gingerly.

"You're right—Henry Lefumez!"

"I could have guessed that my husband prepared the bits of paper and you must remember, Henry, you can't be married to any man and not know all his tricks! There you are—three little bits of truth."

"This is dreadful! Yet dreadful isn't exactly the word. It's—it's very curious."

There was no doubt about Henry's innocence. Even Billie was convinced that he knew nothing of her husband's sleight-of-hand tricks.

"Is curious the word?" she bantered.

"It's more than curious," admitted Lefumez. "It's—I'm searching for the right word."

"Don't search any more, the matter is beyond words! The whole thing is as clear as your innocence! Edmond deliberately planned to pick you to

keep company with me during his absence!"

"I may be a bit thick," said Lefumez, "but isn't there an undercurrent to that last remark of yours?"

Billie paid no attention to his question.

"He planned it so that neither Cardan nor Merignol would be chosen. He had it all cut and dried so that it would be only you."

"I don't get it yet," Lefumez fumed. "Why me?"

"Don't you understand his little Machiavelian scheme?"

"I am beginning to have an inkling."

"Edmond wishes to divorce me. I have already refused to give him that satisfaction; first, because I don't love anyone, second, because no one loves me, third, because I wish to get even with Edmond who has treated me shabbily and deceived me like a double-crossing cad. So—what has he trumped up? This clever little meeting here to-night to amuse his sense of humour and to throw you into my arms. First, a lark, then something serious—then divorce! And M. le Marquis would gallop to his mistress for a new ride."

"I beg your pardon."

"Well, that isn't exactly the word—a new marriage. They should have first taken a closer look at me, I'm not so blind. The idea of putting such a thin scheme over on me."

"Oh, oh, but this is dreadful," Lefumez blurted

out. " 'Pon my word, no one could ever put anything over on you! "

" It's Edmond all right, I know his line." She began to laugh. " Ah, for a husband, I've been well served. Just think that I hesitated between an Austrian Baron, a Roman prince, a Spanish Duke, an English Lord and a Hindu Rajah. I should have married the lift boy! Then I'd know when I was up and when I was down. The thing that rubs me the wrong way is that you, Henry, accepted this ignoble part in my husband's scheme."

Lefumez almost jumped out of his chair. " What's that you say? That I accepted? "

Billie had shelved her smile.

" Yes, you," she accused. " You, who seemed such a good, loyal friend of mine, you consented to this trick which is in such rotten taste."

Lefumez sputtered with protestation.

" That isn't fair. A moment ago you spoke of my innocence, you said I was thick——"

" You said that yourself. Perhaps you aren't so stupid as you look."

" Stupid! "

" Well—innocent. Henry Lefumez, you should be ashamed of yourself, playing retriever to a complacent husband in order to permit him to put one over on his unsuspecting wife."

" Unsuspecting! "

" Yes. Allowing yourself to be used to support a

villainous trick which, no doubt, has been churning about in Edmond's head for the last six months! I haven't a very fine opinion of you!"

Lefumez was distraught.

"Oh, Billie," he muttered. Dear Marquise, I . . . truthfully—you've got me all wrong."

"The facts speak for themselves. I'm not convinced yet that you didn't have a premonition of Edmond's plot."

"I repeat a thousand times, I'm quite innocent."

"My husband probably said to himself: 'I've got to get my divorce by hook or by crook! Thank heaven I have a baby—er—boy-faced Henry! I must think up some scheme to use him as a means to an end.'"

Henry tried to bristle. He might have saved the effort.

"Those weren't exactly his words!" he fumed.

"No, but they were probably his thoughts. And all I've got to say is that I don't think it's very nice of you to lend yourself to such shabby treatment."

That she was really angry went without saying. There was an awkward silence. Finally Lefumez said, without looking directly at her.

"It is true and your accusations strike me deep. Therefore I'm going, my dear Billie, to give you a pledge, which isn't exactly the word. Before God and before all men, I swear to you that your husband made a mistake when he thought me capable of furthering

his designs. You have opened my eyes—I will not be his kitten to snatch the hot chestnuts out of the fire! I'll fool him."

Billie seemed pleased.

"It's for me that you say all that? You're not trying to ease your conscience?"

"Not at all," Lefumez returned. "I express myself poorly. I wanted to say that, thank God, I'm not one of those young rotters who respect nothing!"

Billie was still smiling.

"And all that is said for my ears too?"

"Er—no. You see, I'm actually affected, Billie. I'm an extremely emotional type, and when I feel—I feel. And I must keep on feeling that way! I can't put my hands on the words to——"

"The exact word doesn't amount to anything. Little Henry, your hooks are very cleverly baited, even if your intentions normally are pure. You can't completely fool me! Nor yourself! You accept Edmond's programme with a wink of the eye and try to be friends with me just the same."

Billie's psycho-analysis was all that was needed to complete Henry's confusion. He blushed and blinked like a traffic signal on a rainy night.

"Billie," he said, fiddling about for the words. "What a woman. You have the air of playing with me like a tigress with a mouse, but I swear to you, on that which is dearest, that you could appear before me with absolutely nothing on, in my room in the middle

of the night, and I assure you I wouldn't

The Marquise looked at him archly under her lashes.

" You would save yourself by jumping out of the window ! Or crawl under the bed, or disappear down the dumb-waiter ! Don't worry, old kid, nothing like that's going to happen to you. And I don't walk in my sleep ! "

Lefumez looked at her gravely.

" It was an imaginary case that I employed there."

He reached across the table and tried to pat her hand reassuringly. But she drew it out of his reach, still suspicious.

" It was more than a figure of imagination, my boy," she frowned, " it was my entire anatomy ! " Then, being a woman, and a young and pretty one, she added : " It wouldn't be so terribly discouraging to look at me in the all-together ! "

Lefumez floundered for the exact word,

" What I wished to say was that I am a man of duty——"

" You'll have need of it, since we're going to see quite a lot of each other."

Lefumez's manner became furtive. He glanced here and there like a bird trying to locate the door in its cage. Billie relented. For after all Lefumez did appear innocent. He was either a splendid actor or a very decent young man—or both. She reached over and patted his hand. Lefumez was keenly moved by her graciousness. " Billie," he protested, " I insist

—nude or no nude—I would be a gentleman to the end."

" And you will hold to it?"

" You have my word," Lefumez assured her, as he grabbed her hands in real emotional candour.

X

THE door flew open and the Marquis, the Baron and Merignol marched in.

" You might have knocked," said Billie to her husband. De Barestan laughed loudly.

" Did you hear that?" he appealed to the Baron and Merignol. " Well! well! We mustn't interrupt Adonis and Psyche. Already the seed is planted!"

Cardan echoed the Marquis's sentiment.

" The chaperon and his chick," he chortled.

Merignol was not to be left out.

" The Sultan's wife and her Eunuch!"

For once Lefumez seemed quite amiable.

" Thanks," he returned. " With that kind of spoofing, you put a dimmer on my chances."

The Marquis looked at both of them quizzically.

" Then, Billie, are we to understand that you don't want to be placed in the pure hands of Henry until my return?"

The drift of the conversation was becoming too personal for Lefumez. He blushed and then blushed again. But Billie was quite at ease as she answered her husband.

"Why do you wish it so?" she asked. "Your friend, Lefumez, is a charming boy. He won't play the part of Adonis nor Page nor Eunuch to me! I am quite sure that he will be the trustworthy comrade so that he can pal about with me while you are searching for oil—presumably oil—in Morocco."

Cardan and Merignol approached the Marquise to assure her of their constant regard. De Barestan took the opportunity to draw Lefumez aside.

"Now you understand, Henry, what I'm telling you," he whispered sharply. "You commence with a certain softness, you understand. You insinuate yourself into her intimate regard and then, when you see the way open for you, march through the gates into the forbidden city."

Lefumez laughed. Billie heard him and turned. At least it seemed to the Marquise that Lefumez was laughing.

"You certainly express yourself precisely," Henry said. "You may count on me to lay siege and finally scale the walls! You will be well served!"

"Fine!" de Barestan whispered. "Henry, you fix it so I get my divorce and I will be your debtor for life! Don't forget that!" Then he turned to the rest. "What do you say, my children, shall we go

and finish the evening at ‘ Scheherazade ’? ”

“ Great idea! ” Cardan agreed. “ One must relax a bit after serious affairs. You are coming, Billie? ”

There was a short silence. Billie was disappointed. She hadn’t been able to overhear what her husband had whispered to Lefumez!

“ I follow you, Baron,” Billie answered.

The Marquise and the Baron were the first to go out the door.

Lefumez lingered and drew de Barestan aside.

“ Look here,” he began.

“ What? ”

“ I put my foot down,” snapped Lefumez. “ I’m not going to Montmartre in this get-up. They would take me for the Mayor of Saint-Mandé! ”

“ You’re goofy! ” exploded de Barestan. Then his tone became more amiable. “ On the contrary, you look too good to be true. I will tell the manager that you are the president of a South American Republic on a pleasure jaunt on Government money. Stick this in your buttonhole,” he said as he picked a big yellow flower from the vase in the centre of the table. “ Now you will be from Paraguay! ”

Lefumez tried to take the flower out, but the Marquis prevented him.

“ Don’t,” said de Barestan. “ You are now a rainbow in crêpe.”

“ I look like some cheap South American toff. And yet, toff isn’t the precise word.”

"No, I would use another word myself." The Marquis threw his arm affectionately about Henry's shoulder. "Dammit! Henry, if I didn't have you, I'd have to invent something like you. My boy, you are ideal. A square peg in a round hole. You go first, I will have a word with the head waiter."

Lefumez walked solemnly out of the room. De Barestan gazed at him out in the corridor, then went quietly over to the door of the next room, opened it and called out softly:

"Simone! It is I."

Simone came in quickly.

"Where have you been? I'm dying of impatience."

De Barestan took her in his arms.

"Everything goes well, my dear."

He kissed her as if he meant it. "Simone, I adore you!"

Simone returned the kiss, but answered practically:

"But, Edmond, tell me?"

When Simone was there de Barestan could see absolutely nothing else. She was a bewildering, voluptuous brightness that blocked out everything about her like Venus did the heavens on certain nights. A daughter of the Gods of Love; a daughter of joy, ecstasy, excitement!

The Marquis de Barestan was in a bad way! But everyone who goes up, must come down. De Barestan suddenly hit terra firma with a thud. Simone was speaking. . . .

"Edmond!" . . . For the flash of the moment her voice seemed shrill. "You look as though you were coming out of an anæsthetic!"

She didn't know how near the truth she was! Her blunt remark seemed to bring him instantly out of his haze.

"I am obliged to join them," de Barestan said wearily; "go back to your home. I will rejoin you there not later than two in the morning."

He started to press her back through the door. Simone, who was far from being stupid, tried another tack.

"But your scheme, dearest," she asked. "How did it go?"

De Barestan, himself again, laughed raucously.

"Admirably! My wife is already in the jaws of the wolf! I will be a wronged husband in six weeks. Kiss me, Simone! Hooray!"

PART TWO



IT BOILS OVER

I

THE drawing-room in the château of the Marquis de Barestan, near de Villers, led out on to the terrace. The furnishings were not formal. The objects of art and the paintings were, in a way, modest. The rustic furniture, well chosen for comfort, showed use, however, it certainly was not shabby. The room gave you an instant impression that human beings lived in it, not marionettes.

There was a certain warmth. The subtle sensing of a personality. Perhaps Billie had something to do with this!

A door at right led to the apartment of the Marquise, another, at left, opened into the rooms occupied by Henry Lefumez.

It was five o'clock on an afternoon several weeks after the Marquis had left for Morocco, in search of oil or something or other.

The house-parlourmaid, Amelie, rather a smart-looking little baggage for her position, was talking to Baron Cardan and M. Merignol.

Cardan was boozing away as usual, not by any means losing sight of the comely little tease-in-petticoat in front of him.

"So, young lady," he chirped, like some dicky-bird to his mate, "you say that the Marquise is down at the end of the park. Is that far?"

Amelie curtsied.

"Eight hundred metres, Monsieur," she told him. Merignol whistled sharply.

"Young woman," he said, "if you haven't a toy railway, like the one at Deauville, you will take us by the hand—I should say, take yourself out there and announce to the Marquise that her old friends, the Baron Cardan and M. Merignol, have come in a wreck of a motor-bus from de Villers to wish her a pleasant day."

Baron Cardan corrected him:

"From Paris!"

"Quite a long way," accepted Merignol.

Cardan had an afterthought.

"We don't inconvenience the Marquise?"

"No, I think not, Monsieur," Amelie smiled back at him. "Mme de Barestan is down in the great *champ de luzerne*."

"What is she doing in the alfalfa?" asked Merignol gravely.

The maid giggled.

"She is looking for four-leaf clovers!"

Cardan beamed upon Amelie.

"Splendid!" he exclaimed. "That is not a bad sign! Things go well. Good! Run on, announce us, Mademoiselle."

"Yes, sir," said Amelie, as she started through the French doors out to the terrace, first taking a shy appraising look at Cardan.

The Baron broke into a rhapsody of delight.

"A well-constructed maid! Ah—four-leaf clovers!" He rubbed his hands together. "This pretty American truly has the superstition of a romantic young girl."

"My dear fellow," answered Merignol, "all women are superstitious. As for Billie, in my humble opinion, perhaps she is a romantic young girl. At the same time, Cardan, don't make a mistake, she has something in that pretty head of hers, and what is more, the ability to use it."

Cardan nodded his head in agreement.

"I can't get that saucy-looking maid out of my mind," he cooed.

"Out of your what?" demanded Merignol.

"I shouldn't have such a searching eye!" Cardan went on. "Ahem, what do you think of this plot of de Barestan's, between us?"

"Between us and the newel post, to cheat on oneself according to prearranged plans, *bien, mon brave*, that's a singular idea."

"Why singular?"

Merignol looked at him seriously.

"I find it singular that he should use his best friend. Possibly it has been done before, but I don't recall a case. I did know a certain chap who ordered

a detective to do the trick with his wife. Cold-blooded, *hein?*"

"And what happened then?" asked Cardan.
Merignol chuckled.

"The detective was over-ambitious, as I remember the story, too well rehearsed in his rôle, he slept with the mistress of the husband instead of his wife."

"Oh, well, detectives are always trying to get at the bottom of things," observed Cardan, with a twinkle in his eye. "But Lefumez is incapable of any trick like that. He has given his word. He's of the type who say: 'Let those who wish to, play those sort of tricks, but not I.' In my estimation, he will compromise with the fair Billie, he will do just what she wishes him to do!"

Merignol became philosophical.

"The honour of a woman," he lectured to Cardan, "is a piece of ice that the presence of a he-man melts sometimes. Only, these queer sexy days, it is hard to tell who is a he-man and who's just a male! To return to our muttons, do you know where Billie and Henry actually are? I mean, do you know what they're actually doing?"

The Baron shook his head.

"Or actually done?" he furthered. "Damn if I know, Merignol. Six to one, and sex to the other! Take your pick! It's been a month or so since de Barestan left. In Paris I've plumped into Billie and Lefumez several times trotting round together.

Frankly, I haven't noticed anything hot, anything extraordinary, I should say, about their deportment. They had the air of two frank, very loyal pals. You might term it a truly American friendship. I said to myself: 'Henry is a shrewd party, he's going to upset Billie by first winning her true friendship.' You know, Merignol, with certain young women who are hard to unbend one must proceed with the patience of a redskin!"

"Yes, yes, I know," acknowledged Merignol, looking round the room, and then out on the terrace, as though he were afraid the comely maid were listening. "Cardan, I once courted a fine little wench like that, who didn't wish to learn any new tricks from me. I used the old gag you spoke of, that of first winning her friendship. It was a slow process, after several months she went into some sort of a nervous rage one evening and tried to draw a knife across my throat. I had mistaken my type! She was a sadist! I should have gone after her in a different way."

"In a faster way," Cardan corrected him. "You wore her out! Speaking of this situation here, Merignol, you believe that another *quart d'heure* of Nogi is in the air?"

"You're jumping to conclusions," retorted Merignol. "I don't believe anything of the sort. If you wish to quote similes, you recall Victor Hugo's 'Will They Eat?' Well, for us, the title changes: 'Will They Love?'"

Cardan was always ripe for a bet. He conceded himself to be a natural born gambler.

"Are you willing to bet on it?" he asked Merignol.

Merignol was not going to let Cardan out-do him.

"Yes," he said. "I'll take Lefumez at three to one."

"You're on, Merignol. How shall we place it?"

"On Billie's pillow!"

Cardan roared.

"And when you'd look there to find out whether it was head or tail, you would find it was two heads!"

"I wish I actually knew what was going on."

"And while it is going on, de Barestan is miles away looking for oil."

Merignol looked at Cardan wisely.

"He'd better be looking for it," he said. "If he's going to divorce Billie's millions, he'll have need of plenty of money."

"Yes, if he takes on a modern mistress. Merignol, what a life de Barestan has led! You remember his marriage with Billie in Boston. Recall how he got acquainted. He trapped his little fox in the park. The very next day he went to Billie's mother and told her, without any frills: 'Madame, I broke the paw of your daughter's doggie. I am ready to mend it.' 'Are you a veterinarian, Monsieur?' asked the Boston mama solemnly. 'How can you repair it?' De Barestan is always the gentleman. He bowed low. 'No, Madame, but I come to ask for the hand of Miss Billie.' "

They both chuckled over the story. Suddenly they heard a man's voice lustily singing a popular ditty. Merignol was the first to recover from the sudden avalanche of vocal music.

"There you are! The whole place has gone cuckoo. You could hear Billie's gardener easily in de Villers! From the soul-stirring horse-power he's putting into it, he must be trying to implore the Gods not to forget to sprinkle his salad."

Cardan flicked the ash from his cigarette before he replied. With a broad grin he started towards the terrace door. He peered out.

"I thought so! Come, Merignol, see for yourself."

Merignol shrugged his shoulders and joined Cardan.

"Look at what?" he demanded, "where?"

Cardan paused a moment for breath, for he was laughing heartily.

"My boy, there's only one voice like that. When I heard its first cadence—cadence isn't the exact word, yelp is better—I knew that no gardener ever possessed a voice like that. Frankly, it sounds to me more like the wail of an Eskimo malamute."

Merignol seemed slightly surprised.

"I didn't know you'd ever been in Eskimo-land, although I knew you'd covered a good deal of territory."

Cardan nodded in confirmation.

"Yes, I've covered a great deal but not the Eskimos. Come out of your day dreams, Merignol. Anyone

would recognize immediately that voice as in a class by itself! Perhaps it resembles more that of a Norwegian sea-lion."

Merignol sniffed impatiently.

" You and your pleasantries," he barked. " Where does it come from? "

" Use your eyes," grunted Cardan. " Down at the end of that path, surely you recognize him."

Merignol looked narrowly out into the sunken gardens. What he saw astonished him. He rubbed his eyes as though he didn't believe their accuracy.

" It is certainly he."

" Well, well, I never knew Lefumez could sing."

" He can't."

Merignol made a sudden gesture of annoyance.

" I don't see the Juliet."

" What did you say? "

Merignol was whistling softly to himself.

" Nothing," he replied. " The golden calf is not always on the scene, but the body sentinel is always at his post. In short, Cardan, it is Romeo without Juliet."

" And without a balcony, unless it's at the other end of the park." Cardan paused again for breath and trying to put a Far North vigour into his tone, he cried out: " Henry! Henry! "

The voice of Lefumez suddenly came down several tones.

" Oh, ho! Oh, ho! " he sang out.

II

MERIGNOL and Cardan stood transfixed in the terrace doorway. Lefumez slowly approached them. He was no longer an elegantly dressed young chap. He now wore working pants, noiseless shoes with twine soles, a vest that refused description. Over his shoulder hung the professional paraphernalia of a fisherman. An old panama covered his disarranged hair. His cheeks showed that he hadn't been shaved for a number of days.

His manner, however, was quite jovial. He hailed his friends with unusual warmth.

" See who's here ! " he cried out, imitative of Billie's slang. " This is a great surprise ! How do you do, Baron. Hello, dear old Merignol. . . . I'm awfully glad to see you two fellows."

He reached out and shook their hands heartily. Cardan was the first to recover his breath.

" Henry ! " he proclaimed. " The surprise is for us ! "

" Decidedly ! Both your valiant voice and your *dernier cri* costume. Behold, Lefumez fishing—on the end of a line." Merignol snickered.

Lefumez wasn't flurried. There was no doubt that he had changed in the few weeks that he'd been

a guest at the château. His old nervousness seemed to have been replaced with an odd assurance. His manner was more affable.

"Excuse my dirty hands," he said. "I came from the pool where I had the damnedest luck in the world. Believe it or not, a perch that must have weighed a pound and a half somehow managed to wriggle himself off my hook."

"It couldn't have been a female or you would have landed her, especially in that fisherman's get-up," Cardan bantered.

Lefumez smiled graciously.

"I had no way of finding out the sex, it occurred so quickly. It was lively enough. It jumped, oh—a hundred yards from me to the middle of the pool, did a double somersault and a perfect jack-knife dive back into the water."

"Well, even if you did fail to land her," said Cardan, "you certainly got a good run for your effort. Henry, you're an optimist."

"Henry, you are superb." Merignol sized him up. "Something, my boy, has changed about you. You don't search for the exact word. I should say you paint a better picture."

"But that doesn't go for that outlandish costume you've got on," Cardan observed.

"Oh," said Lefumez. "I'm as dirty as a pig. But you fellows understand how it is in the country."

"Surely," acknowledged Cardan, "but, Henry,

you do make me think of a cave man. And that voice of yours, it's prehistoric too. You remind me of the Stone Hammer Age."

"Go on, you're spoofing me. I admit I'm not a fashion plate and if I'd known you two were listening I would have probably sung that song a trifle softer. Of course, I was singing to an imaginary audience."

"Oh, surely. Perhaps in Paris."

"Perhaps in the skies, it surely must have reached the moon. They will know definitely that the earth is inhabited."

There was no doubt that Lefumez was a changed man. He seemed more at home when bantered by his old friends.

"It certainly seems like old days. You two gay devils razzing me as pér usual. Cardan, give me a cigarette."

But Merignol was quicker than the Baron. Lefumez selected a cigarette out of his case.

"He's going to light it," Merignol explained to Cardan, "by rubbing two flints together. Ah! those good old rock-hammer days!"

"Thanks," said Lefumez, puffing at his cigarette. "Now that you two gay boulevardiers have got all of your wisecracks over, tell me, what is the occasion of your visit out here?"

"I found myself in Villers," explained the Baron. "I plumped into Merignol over at Deauville. We both

had the same idea, to drop in over here and pay our respects to Billie and her noble bodyguard."

"And my faith!" Merignol said frankly, "I was doubting if we would find you here."

"On the contrary," said Lefumez, "it is here that my chances promise best. I am trying to entertain poor little Billie. At least she is not so much alone."

"Well, that's natural," sighed the Baron. "The only solitude women understand is one shared with a man."

Merignol thought hard for a few moments, then shook his head.

"Come, come," he admonished, "confession is good for the soul. Tell us, Lefumez, how goes it, as a body-guard? Whisper to your two old friends—has the order of de Barestan been fulfilled?"

Lefumez tried to look as near like the Sphinx as he could. Merignol opened his mouth to emphasize his question.

"That, my dear friend," Henry quickly told Merignol, "is the secret of the Alcove!"

Merignol was not satisfied with this evasive answer.

"Cardan, look at him! Apollo, before the invention of the Gillette razor! The fair Billie must be crazy about his naturalistic style. And how Lefumez has changed—he tells us absolutely nothing at all."

"At least, Henry, how do you pass the time?" asked Cardan, trying a hand. "Don't hold out anything on us."

Lefumez was quite bland.

"How do I pass the time?" he asked. "That's simple. In the morning I get up."

"You don't tell us."

"Is that possible?"

"I take my breakfast with Billie in the dining-room. Sometimes we eat and sometimes we just chat pleasantly. Then the postman turns up. Billie glances over the morning papers. Then she strolls out into the park where she loves to fuss with the flowers. Generally I follow her."

"Yes, yes, go on!"

"But what do you fuss with—the fish?"

"I pick up the withered flowers that she cuts off and put them aside. Then we eat again, you might say a sort of luncheon. Then we read together for a while. Then we take a stroll. Then I suppose the next thing we do is dine. The next day the postman bobs up and we read the papers again."

"And so on and so on up to the end of the century," snapped Merignol. "But, listen, Lefumez. What do you do after dinner?"

"Yes," queried Cardan, "what happens after dinner?"

Lefumez was quite obliging.

"Oh, Billie plays the piano a little or we have a game of cards, you know, a hand of piquet, crapette."

"And then—?"

"And after you've had enough of piquet?"

"Well, one goes to bed."

Merignol laughed insinuatingly.

"Ha! Ha!—and Madame mounts to her tower."

For the first time Lefumez became serious.

"Look here, Merignol."

But Merignol was hard to squelch. He lowered his voice to a confidential tone.

"She's a jolly little companion? Confess, old boy, we swear to observe professional secrecy, like the priest. We won't repeat it. You have succeeded in gaining her warmest friendship?"

Lefumez was angry.

"Merignol you're a fat old fool."

"Don't be so uppish! Cardan and I were in on the plot. You certainly can tell us the facts. No one is listening. That pretty maid is out of the way. Tell us a little. You must have succeeded to some extent in all these weeks. Just how far have you gone?"

"My dear fellow," frowned Lefumez, "your insistence is in bad taste."

The claret-coloured face of the roly-poly Merignol became redder than ever.

"See, he gets sore, ha! ha! Where there's anger—there's no innocence!"

Cardan, sensing that Lefumez was really angry, tried to save the situation.

"Henry, it's natural we'd like to know how things progress. And you understand, Merignol, that Henry, being a gentleman, is obliged to preserve a certain——"

Lefumez cut him short.

"Not at all. Listen, do I look like a gallant gentleman? I don't mean that, I mean that if I were a gallant gentleman, would I——"

"Where is Billie's room?"

Lefumez came down a tone or so.

"Here on the left. I occupy the bedroom to the right."

"I see, I see. Then this drawing-room between the bedrooms is the Rubicon?" said the Baron, rubbing his hands.

"And Mr. Henry Caveman, badly shaven, what keeps you from leaping across the Rubicon?" plagued Merignol, who was determined to bring Lefumez out of his newly acquired self-control.

But Henry surprised Merignol, he had recovered some of his former humour.

"I'll wait until you teach me how to swim. Or get so fat that I can't sink!"

"Henry's becoming like you, a kidder," Merignol sarcastically informed the Baron. "Zut! I just remembered that I left my Lorraine out in the sun and my tyres are blown up far too much. I must attend to them. I'll be back in a few minutes. Henry, don't you confess anything worth while till I get back."

He rushed out of the door.

III

LEFUMEZ, assured that Merignol had left, turned to the Baron.

"Don't leave, I want to speak to you."

The Baron smiled understandingly.

"I think I understand."

"Surely. I can tell you everything. You're a real pal, Cardan. Merignol is the kind of a friend that I don't quite trust. He talks far too much."

Cardan rushed to Merignol's defence.

"Gossip? No. To gad about, he's much too fat."

"A tragedy in suet! I've nothing against the old plug, but I'd rather do my confessional to you, Cardan."

"Old boy, ease your conscience, what's up?"

"Look at me, Freddie, from my head to my feet. Take it all in—look at my tramp's head, my eight days' beard, my disordered clothes, my rope-strung shoes. Doesn't all of that, Freddie, signify anything to a shrewd chap like you?"

"Sure; it signifies that you've just come back from fishing."

"No, no, my dear old fellow. I'm this way from morning till night. Ever since I've been living here in the château with Billie."

"Dressed like that? Why?"

"Well, if you can't guess, I'm going to let the cat

out of the bag. You can rest assured that it doesn't tickle me to death that I parade around looking like a mildewed scarecrow." His tone became quite serious. "All that, my dear Cardan, is an assurance against dishonour."

"What the hell!" blurted out the astonished Cardan.

Lefumez went on with his explanation.

"Edmond gave me a precise mission to perform. You and Merignol imagine, of course, that I am here to carry it out. The truth in a nutshell is that between you and me I cannot. Plainly, it is impossible."

"But I don't understand. Billie isn't wise to the plot."

"It isn't that," answered Lefumez tactfully. "Of course, naturally, Billie is always suspicious about her husband. He has fooled her so many times that she believes every move of his is some trick. She told me when I first came here, 'You a friend, you lend yourself to these dirty tricks of Edmond. You, a man of honour, you agree to doublecross a complacent husband.' Well, Cardan, when a woman opens her heart to you that way, why, you'd feel just as I felt. It made me feel guilty as the devil. My honour has been questioned. I saw that the whole thing was pretty rotten. So, Cardan, I decided to abstain," opined Lefumez with a judicial demeanour.

The Baron looked up sympathetically.

"I can appreciate your sentiment but that doesn't

explain why you go around looking like the very old scratch."

Lefumez sat very still in his chair. Then he began to talk with renewed vigour, as though he were explaining a simple problem to a child. It was a new attitude for him. In most of the explanations hereto-fore he had assumed the rôle of the child, this was the first time he became the prophet.

"My dear Cardan, don't you see, that's simple enough. I swore to Billie to respect her. I am her humble servant, her attentive and loyal cavalier. But, truthfully, the task is a difficult one. One that requires the uttermost tact. The more I come in contact with this adorable young girl, for that's what she is decidedly, the more I discover in her untold charms. You don't have to tickle me with a swan's feather to make me own up that I'm on the verge of falling in love with Billie. I defy any gentleman to live near her and not fall a prey to similar sentiment. In point of fact, Freddie, I have given her my word that I wouldn't play the game of her husband."

Cardan, who wasn't a bad sort, affected by the sincerity of Henry's tone, reached over and affectionately seized his arm.

"My poor boy," he blurted out. "Caught between your honour and your natural good taste, the old battle between mind and heart."

Lefumez responded to the Baron's sympathetic admission.

"Yes, quite so, old man. You have hit the situation on the head. That's just where things complicate themselves. Since this life here in the château brought us together so pleasantly, I began to think that Billie, on her side, appreciated my company more and more. Her companionship, reserved enough at the start, has become quite precious. I'm no poet and I don't know how to put those things."

The Baron, following his every word, cut in:

"You're doing quite well, continue."

"Like a little wild bird, who first looks at the birdcatcher from her limb high upon the tree, she has descended from branch to branch and I have the impression that if I would move my finger, she would come and perch on it in full confidence. And that, dear Freddie, that would——" Overcome by the intensity of his emotion he reverted momentarily to his former habit, "I search for the word—that would be the beginning of the end. I wouldn't be able to hold back. So, I did the only thing to be done under the circumstances."

The Baron was nonplussed.

"Pardon me if I'm stupid, but I don't——"

"Of course you understand—just as the scarecrow frightens the birds away in the fields, I have decided to put a handicap in front of Billie so that she won't see me to best advantage."

"I see!"

"I knew you would. I said to myself: 'Henry!'

No, that isn't exactly what I said to myself——”

“ I understand.”

“ I said : ‘ My filthy old chap, you're on a dangerous cliff, you're about to behave like a young scoundrel. You must check yourself in time, and the most radical way is to disgust Billie with yourself. It is the only way that you can be fair to Billie and to de Barestan and preserve your honour.’ There is nothing, Freddie, that cools a growing love like a dirty and unshaven appearance.”

“ You are eminently right.”

“ Once,” Lefumez continued, “ down at the sea-shore I knew a young girl who broke her engagement to a young man just because he took his shoes off in front of her and exposed a hole in his stocking through which a huge bunion showed ! ”

Cardan sensed that there were two Henry Lefumez, dual personalities, like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Perhaps the Sublime and the Ridiculous! Certainly there was the old Lefumez and there was the new. It was quite certain he couldn't have changed completely in a few weeks, even under the inspiration of a tender affection. The Baron was touched. He looked at Lefumez with a new friendliness.

“ My dear boy, I've never thought so well of you as at this precise moment.”

“ Thanks, Freddie. You're the first one whom I've opened my heart to. I need support, understanding. What I've told you is the unvarnished truth, old

man, you have my word for it. And when you look at me, dressed as I am, you may rest assured that I feel that I am showing the bunion in my case."

" You are heroic, my poor Henry."

" Oh, I don't deny that it takes a certain courage to debase yourself in front of a woman when you'd like to be loved by her, because, after all, I don't pretend to be good looking, although, under ordinary circumstances, Cardan, I don't look so bad, do I? "

The Baron reflected a moment before he answered.

" Henry! " he said. " You're too full of scruples."

" Yes, I admit I have them, or have developed them since I've been here. It's hard to describe what I've gone through, what I have and what I haven't. I suppose scrupulous is the best description. I don't regret it. After all, it must be born in a fellow, even if it does take an occasion like this to bring it out. Why, Cardan, if my mother had had twins, I'm sure that just as we were about to pop out into the world I would have instantly said to my twin brother: ' After you, Alphonse.' "

Cardan smiled.

" On the supposition that your name was to be Gaston and that your other half wasn't a young lady."

Lefumez refused to be jarred out of his sentimental mood.

" Above all, Cardan, keep to yourself what I've just confessed to you. Not a word to anyone. Because, in reality, I find myself in a frightful dilemma. To

please Edmond I have to seduce his wife, but to please Billie, well, I have to double-cross Edmond. Really, old boy, it's terribly complicated. I wish I were twins!"

"My poor Henry, you have my most profound understanding. I would say that if you solve a problem like that you should have the Nobel Prize."

A bell in the adjoining room was heard ringing. It brought Lefumez back to earth.

"Where is Billie?"

"The parlourmaid has gone to get her, down at the end of the park, I think she said."

"Good! Now, Cardan, excuse me for a few minutes. The bell has just rung; it's the postman; I'm expecting an important letter."

"Go on, my boy. I will go look for Billie."

Lefumez rushed out.

IV

CARDAN took up his hat and started towards the terrace door just as Billie entered. He stood dumbfounded, taking her in from head to foot. It was no longer the immaculate young woman who wore the adorable dress at the Adam's Apple that evening. Henry -wasn't the only one who had undergone a transforma-

tion, reversing the order from the butterfly to the chrysalis. For the Billie who stood in the doorway smiling at the Baron was a country miss in a cheap cotton frock, a hole in her stocking, no powder. No rouge on her lips, no jewellery. Her hair was carelessly disarranged. Yet these tawdry habiliments failed to dim the radiance of youth and beauty. Rare wine does not lose its sparkle or bouquet for being served in a cheap glass!

Billie was in radiant humour. Her eyes were sparkling with fun.

"Hello, Baron," she hailed. "I ask your pardon for receiving you in this costume. But you know how it is with your country friends, one rushes forward to see them without making any change. I'm so glad you came."

"Truthfully, I am highly flattered, Marquise. Figure to yourself that Merignol and I get the idea to come to wish you a pleasant afternoon. We were in Villers and lost no time. Merignol is outside fussing with his car and will be here in a minute if he hears you raving over me."

Billie impulsively seized both his hands.

"Dear old boy. That's nice of you two, awfully decent to surprise me in this way." She lowered her voice. "You especially, Baron. I'm sure he won't hear that."

The Baron fairly swallowed in her flattery.

"I'm sorry, dear Marquise, but I haven't any news

for you, any gossip. You understand, of course, that I'm from an antediluvian epoch, where they still make a cult of friendship. Therefore I hope that we haven't—that is, I haven't interrupted your search for four-leaf clovers."

"Would you believe it! At my age—four-leaf clovers! Truly, I am a schoolgirl."

"You have need of good luck? I am surprised!"

"Everyone needs good luck."

Cardan made a wry face.

"And I thought you were supremely happy."

"Well, not supremely. There is always a fly in the ointment of every happiness! Do you believe, Baron, that a galloping husband, a château in Normandy, plus a charming friend produce supreme happiness, complete good luck? My marriage—oh, how I swallowed hook, sinker and bait, Freddie."

Cardan voiced a protest.

"You're too bitter, Marquise. De Barestan really is an awfully nice fellow."

"With everyone else, yes! With me, it's a different story. The old maxim about the valet and the gentleman should be changed, it is so frequently a husband who can never be a gentleman to his wife!"

Cardan thought it best to veer the subject.

"You have news from Morocco? They certainly haven't struck oil yet, it's too soon. Have they actually found it?"

"I suppose so," she admitted indifferently. "Three letters since his departure."

Cardan again changed the subject.

"By the way," he said, "I haven't asked you of any news of Henry. I saw him just now, returning from fishing." He looked at her rather intently. "I should say," he observed, "you two seem to be running along rather smoothly here."

Billie's carefree laughter disarmed any suspicions Cardan might have had for the moment.

"Excellently. What a devoted friend—Henry! What a charming boy he is, he's never really grown up and yet he isn't of the twentieth century. My ruffian of a husband has good choice. Why, Henry runs around on all fours to please me, to distract me. Of course, you understand that I'm not very keen about modern social life. I really like the natural living out here in the country, away from trains and smoke and dust and noise. One becomes a new person out here after a few weeks. Away from everything."

"You've got your wish, the château is quite a distance from the station."

"I was speaking of the railway on the baccarat tables. Of course, I haven't been all alone, Henry accompanied me here."

"And, no doubt, has no desire to leave you."

"We live like two good comrades of the masculine sex, you might say. He fishes and I work in the

garden. Just like two shipwrecked people on an island in the south sea. No fussing up, no formalities. Nothing swagger at all, everything natural."

Cardan looked her over good-naturedly.

"In short, I see, my dear Billie, that you've hung up your beautiful clothes in your clothes-press. It is quite true that in order to collect four-leaf clovers a ballroom dress is not the ideal costume."

Billie shrugged her shoulders resignedly.

"You find me ugly as I am? I suppose most people would say 'A fright,' wouldn't they?"

"Oh no! *Picaresque!*"

"You're polite. Nevertheless, a while ago you stared at me as if your eyes were going to pop out in obvious disapproval. Yes, yes. You were saying to yourself: 'Now there's a girl who at least doesn't bother herself to look her prettiest before her friends.' Don't protest. In a way it would be natural to think that. So, take a good look at me, Freddie—from head to knee! Look at my hair, which is all helter-skelter, my blouse like that of a barmaid on vacation. My cheeks without make-up, my lips without rouge, my hands like a nursery-maid's. Ah, I have said too much." She lowered her head, worried.

"My dear little Billie, you must open your heart to me. When melancholic young women park their confiding little heads on the shoulder of old papas like me, that's just about the last conquest that's worth bragging about. No danger at all! Come, my child."

Shyly she leaned on his shoulder and began to cry softly. Cardan was genuinely affected. He gave her a reassuring pat or two.

"Without hesitation you should be confident of my good understanding—a friendship so true, so sure."

"Yes, yes," she sobbed effectively, "I have confidence in you, Baron, I trust you implicitly. So I open up my heart. I tell you frankly, I am very unhappy."

The Baron gave her an extra pat of sympathy.

"Why?" he asked.

Tears welled in Billie's eyes.

"You don't think it gives me pleasure to appear all day long in front of Henry looking like the last rose of summer, do you? Going around with a maid's dust-cap on my head and stockings that are always falling down? Can't you guess what all that signifies—yes, signifies, that is the exact word? You are so wise, Freddie, you know the world, you know people, you know motives! Surely you can understand. In conducting myself this way I am trying to throw water on the fire."

The scene became reminiscent to Cardan. Here in Billie was Lefumez's twin and she was a young lady! Billie's confession promised to be but an echo of Henry's. The Baron permitted himself a slight chuckle of delight. Life sometimes was more delightful than fiction.

"I understand, Billie," he sympathized.

"I knew you would. Of all my husband's friends you're perhaps the most intelligent."

"I've heard that before this afternoon, thanks just the same."

Billie was too far into her confession to be distracted by the Baron's odd remark.

"Surely, yes. Ever since my husband left I've been living in the house with Henry—almost every minute with him, except at night. Naturally, Henry has his faults, but a gentleman without faults, that would be like America without politicians."

"Soup without salt, yes."

"And, after all, you have to grant Henry an admirable loyalty. He's really an awfully nice character—that's not exactly the word—he's a good sport!"

"Yes, I know."

"But I'm not blind. I can see this good comrade fights despairingly to remain just a good pal and not to excite my—I'm searching for the right word——"

"You don't have to, I've known it for years."

Billie blushed becomingly.

"Well, you understand, not to get me all hot and bothered as my husband fully intended him to do. I don't have to look at him twice to attract his attention. He reminds me of a performer walking on a tight wire. If I took his balancing-stick away from him he'd come a cropper, probably into my lap. So, Freddie, I say to myself——"

"Yes," cut in the Baron, who had a pretty fair idea, from Henry's confession, as to what Billie would say. He wondered for a moment if the situation could be as innocent as it seemed.

"So I say to myself," she repeated, "'I must save him from falling, and the best and the surest method is to parade in front of him every day a very unattractive Billie.' You understand, Baron. 'It will cool his ardour, hold his admiration in restraint.' I have read in novels that familiarity and neglect, cold cream and curl papers would kill real love like poison kills mice. You see, Freddie, I am trying to kill love."

"And why?" mused Cardan, aloud.

There was uncomfortable silence.

"My dear Freddie, my husband put Henry on my trail to make me untrue to him, so that then he could marry his mistress. Nothing doing! I am as bullet-headed as an Irish policeman. My husband can stew in his own juice! I won't be compromised! So I stand pat. Only, Freddie, I wouldn't tell anyone else but you, and the four walls; the temptation is very keen to fall off my perch and if I don't watch my step I don't know what's going to happen to me."

The Baron glanced at her approvingly.

"Billie," he ejaculated. "You're the most stoical of lovely women."

Billie was obviously elated.

"Then you think I've made myself unattractive enough, my dear?"

"But look here, Billie, if you're really in earnest do you think this method is going to prove efficient?"

"I think so. If lovers, when they jump out of their beds, would see their mistresses as they actually look in the morning, their ardour would cool! Mistresses without their wigs and warpaint, their bust-bolsters and false lashes and imitation that and imitation this; no, there would be no second sight then!"

"Brrr!" The Baron shivered. "You make even an old chap like me afraid."

Merignol came in from the terrace; he had Lefumez by the arm and was propelling him along.

"I bring you back the Man of the Forest," Merignol sung out. "Ah! the fair Marquise! I am enraptured to shake your hand. Cardan's told you that we were worried about how you were getting along?"

Billie nodded in confirmation.

"Yes, very nice of you two to come. You must excuse the down-on-the-farm costume in which I receive you."

"It is fortunate that you are in such excellent hands," dryly remarked Merignol, glancing aside for emphasis at Lefumez. "We never dreamed that you had become——"

Billie was looking at Lefumez. She interrupted Merignol's ruminations.

"Have you had anything to drink, Henry?"

"No."

Billie turned to Merignol.

"A glass of port, Merignol?"

"Yes, willingly, port is exactly the word, but it will have to be the good-bye drink, because it is late and I must drive Cardan over to Villers and keep a dinner engagement myself in Deauville. Thanks."

"What a worldly chap you are," commented Lefumez serenely. Then male curiosity got the best of him. "You old dévil, you've started a new adventure in Deauville!"

The Baron went into a ricochet of chuckles.

"Yes, yes," he chortled, "and the rascal is stuck seriously this time, like a fly on a sheet of tanglefoot, this is probably the last nibble he'll take."

The rotund Merignol beamed with good nature. He always enjoyed being the object of conversation, especially when it questioned his morals. It was one of those "thank you for the compliment" attitudes of a man just passing the meridian line of passion.

"I'm not like Henry," he exclaimed, "one of these 'from five to seven o'clock' men! I am modest, I remain put when spoken for. Seriously, Cardan, we must take leave of our charming hostess. It is nearly seven."

"We will see you to your car," said Billie graciously.

She went out first with Cardan. They were chatting pleasantly in lowered voices. Lefumez, with

guilty air, whispered to Merignol. "We are alone, tell me, I am very curious—how goes your new passion?"

Merignol, who was sipping his port, finished the glass before he answered.

"A jewel! But I'm not so sure about the setting. She has a rotten character, but she's a pure little diamond—in the rough."

Lefumez smiled understandingly.

"You'll probably have to land her with a hook—maybe with a net."

Merignol put his glass down. Lefumez took him by the arm and walked him towards the terrace door.

"Have you ever tried to land an eel?"

"Yes, a good eel," laughed Merignol as they passed out the door.

The telephone began to ring.

V

AMELIE, the parlourmaid, rushed in from Billie's room. She hesitated a moment and then took the receiver.

"Allo?" she said. "Oh, it's you, Anna? Sure." She listened for a moment. . . . "Say that again,

I didn't get it. . . . Oh, the *garde champêtre* is snooping out on the road. . . . How's that? . . . Oh, you talked with him. What does he want? I'm sure no one sent for him! . . . No, it wasn't Frederic. . . . Oh, looking for poachers! . . . Good! I will tell Madame, thanks."

The tones of a Klaxon horn were heard fading into the distance. There were voices on the terrace and Henry and Billie appeared in the doorway. Lefumez was talking.

"That old scallawag Merignol! What a Don Juan! He's giving himself away free to every woman who catches his eye."

"You can never tell about those fat ones!" said Billie. "They insist that no woman loves them, and they disarm you while they're repeating it!"

They hadn't noticed Amelie. She coughed.

"Mme la Marquise has not looked out beyond the grilled gate of the park?"

"Why should I?" asked Billie.

"The gatekeeper's wife just called up that a game-keeper has been creeping up and down for the last fifteen minutes on the road in front of our wall."

Billie was astonished.

"The *garde champêtre*? What does he want here?"

"Anna thought perhaps Frederic had sent for him on account of the poacher's snares. She offered him a drink on some pretext before he took up his watch

on the road again. She said he acted rather oddly."

Billie shrugged.

"Let him stay out there all night if it does the fellow any good. Listen, Amelie, you haven't made an assignation with anyone, have you?"

"Oh, *Mme la Marquise!*" she protested.

"Well, then, everything is all right, Amelie. Don't worry about it and tell Augustine to—oh—yes, Henry, do you want dinner soon?"

"We'll let you know in a moment, Amelie. I have an idea," answered Henry cautiously.

Billie turned to the maid.

"You may go," she said.

Amelie was not an exception to prove the rule about the curiosity of maids. She would have liked to have heard more of Lefumer's idea. Could Lefumer have done something that explained the presence of the gamekeeper? It was all a mystery and Amelie loved mystery.

She hesitated, but a sharp look from Billie sent her out.

VI

WHEN they were alone Billie spoke.

"Well, Henry?" she remarked. "I'm always dubious about the ideas of nice young fellows like you."

Lefumez winked at her.

"You and your teasing," he bantered back. "What I was going to tell you, my dear little Billie, was that we ought to have a nice little dinner together down by the river bank at Papa Victor's."

Billie pursed her lips in contemplation.

"Oh, down there, on the bridge at Sevrigny?"

Lefumez was warming up to his inspiration.

"Yes," he encouraged her, "we can be there in five minutes. I'll let out a little secret; I've already arranged with the innkeeper that he will serve us his famous giblets and his Normandy tarts."

Billie shook her head in mock disapproval. In the back of her mind lurked the idea that perhaps they might be playing with fire. Yet, on second thought, Henry's inspiration seemed innocent enough. It all depended on the way you looked at it.

"But we must not forget to separate early so that we can get up first thing in the morning to go to the market in Lisieux," she warned him.

"Look here, Billie," returned Lefumez, "we won't

stay long at Papa Victor's place. You know what I'd really like? I would love to dine with you in the twilight under the trees down by the shore of that charming little stream. You get the idea, like two college boys who are celebrating their birthdays."

Billie laughed.

"Two American college boys wouldn't get much of a kick out of that, unless they had a couple of wrens, and not on the ice. But go on, Henry, your drift is good, even if we should be careful."

"I will show you the most delicious little grove. Yes, down by the old river side."

"Henry, don't tempt me. We mustn't play with matches."

"Oh, darling, in France they frequently don't strike."

"You really do wish to show your charming little grove to an honest wife? Just a minute, where is this little grove?"

Lefumez was non-committal. He didn't intend to be pinned down too accurately.

"Well, it's a small forest."

Billie was amused.

"That's good. You scared me for a moment. Be serious, my appointed sentinel, no, that isn't the exact word."

"I hope not; don't spoil the evening."

"My brave cavalier."

"That's better, but even that isn't the word." He

went over to a mirror on the wall and looked at himself searchingly.

"If Margaret of Burgundy could have met me with this face in her turret she would have knocked me for a row of grave-stones, as you would put it, Billie. Thanks for the compliment just the same." He came closer to her. She seemed to make no effort to get away. Henry went on speaking. "When I think of what an enchanting time this vacation could be in this lovely château under other circumstances, I literally burn up."

"It isn't nice to say that, Henry. Aren't you having a good time as it is?"

Lefumez laughed derisively. He took one look at himself in the mirror and instantly turned away.

"Billie, you know what I'm thinking. You know that it is for me a profound delight to live even this way, in your intimacy. You might say, to intermingle my life with yours. But let's be honest. It's a happiness that is incomplete, or, better put, it brings down on it a shadow. How would you express that precisely, Billie? Wait, I have it. I have the feeling that must come to a dog tied on a leash in a butcher shop which is full of tempting viands."

Billie looked at him for a minute and smiled.

"Well, at least, Henry, your bite isn't as bad as your bark."

"How do you know?" said Lefumez. "No, no, I express myself poorly. Or my comparisons are im-

proper. It is nice that you didn't get angry, Billie. A butcher shop. That's idiotic! What I meant to say—well suppose that—forgive my emotion, Billie. So many things to say to you have welled themselves up in me that I feel like a load of dynamite being carted over a rocky road. I can't help it if I'm a sensitive fellow. You surely realize that. I know my faults, but I lack the initiative in a situation like this: I'm lost. I'm one of those undecided sort of men who lose themselves in empty space." He was rapidly getting back to the old Lefumez. "No, empty space is not the word; who aren't able to make up their minds. Damn it, putting it in plain English, I am more of a Bohemian than——"

"Bohemian? Henry, you, who are so methodical, so self-contained!"

"Oh, you really believe that?"

"Why, you don't know yourself, Henry."

"In any case," Lefumez went on, "there's one thing that I do know. I am here at your side all day long, both very happy and very miserable. I swear to you, that just now in a moment of extreme confidence, I told Cardan, who is our surest and most discreet friend——"

"You told Cardan," said Billie, bewildered.

"I revealed everything to him."

"Oh, is that true? You confided everything to Cardan? You also."

"What! I also?"

"Because—I did the same thing."

"Then, my dear girl, he must have repeated my confession as to why I appear like this in front of you, with this convict head of mine, with this get-up of a—a laundry boat boy."

"No, he told me nothing about your confession. What did you tell him? Oh! Henry, I didn't mean that. I know now. We must have had the same thought, the same reason for our appearance."

Lefumez was astounded.

"What! You also, Billie?"

Billie spoke quickly, as though she wanted to be first to confess.

"I wish to do everything not to excite your nature. I don't want to get you—all hot and bothered. Don't misunderstand. I wish to give you the courage to remain quite cold. I see now that you had the same idea. We were both trying to help each other out of a ticklish situation. We should keep it up. We must both of us turn our heads aside to play hide-and-seek with love."

Lefumez patted her hand.

"What fools we are, my dear little Billie. How willing we are with our self-effacement, and yet when I say self-effacement I am too polite. I should say, to pair ourselves off, that is the word—pair."

Billie laughed nervously and looked around.

"Henry, the pear in the fruit dish, that is my husband! He's set a trap for me, but I haven't been

caught by it yet. You surely can see that, it's as plain as the two eyes in your face. Now I wish to give him a lesson and in order to do so, well—I can't permit myself that luxury without taking the precaution that you know."

Lefumez was almost out of patience.

"Ah, Billie, there's an invisible wall between us," he exclaimed. "There ought to be some way to leap over it."

"No, no," said Billie emphatically, "above all, I wish to punish my husband!"

Lefumez shook his head as he leaned tenderly towards her.

"When I stop to think how we're both rigged up in order to escape temptation, I lose all patience with Fate. Look at me, Billie; what do I look like? A scarecrow in a wheat field—I wish I could think of something worse for the comparison. Here, out of curiosity, run your hand over my cheek. It must feel like a cheese-grater."

Billie started to follow his suggestion and then, on better thought, restrained herself.

"Yes," she admitted reluctantly, "it is hard luck. Look at my figure. See, I haven't even a belt in my blouse."

Affected, Lefumez shyly put his arm about her.

"Ah, we are the shipwrecked of Cytheria! Or, better put, the Robinson Crusoes of Love."

"Chut!" said Billie, gently removing his hand.
"The Man Friday might see us."

"Listen, now that we've made these avowals to each other, these confessions of our true sentiments, is it really sensible that we should fight against them? It is for you to say, Billie. I swear to you that if you think it is absolutely necessary and worth the game, I will be strong, even if you will forget that country bumpkin costume you've got on and go and dress yourself again as the seductive châtelaine of my dreams."

Billie inclined towards him confidentially.

"Good old Henry, I promise. I'll dress a little more correctly for dinner—and you also. After all, if we understand each other perfectly we can resist with so much more intelligence. If it works for me, it should work for you. Fifty-fifty. You can leave your sparrow costume in your wardrobe."

Lefumez suddenly looked at his watch.

"It's an understanding," he exclaimed. "Hurry, Billie. If you were dressed like that I would be ashamed to take you out to the silvery brook where the murmur of its music will be muffled like the jazz band in a night-club. That would be too much, even for my imagination. Come, let us change quickly. I'm tired of looking like both of two evils."

He started towards his door. She took a passing glance in the mirror, nodded approvingly, and disappeared on the other side, into her own room.

VII

TWILIGHT had fallen. Amelie had lit the lamps in the drawing-room. The last rays of the setting sun, coming through the branches of the trees, lit up in bold relief the vases on the great stone mantel. A moment later, de Barestan, in automobile costume, and Simone Diaz in travelling-coat, tip-toed in softly from the terrace. The Marquis lowered his voice.

"Here we are, dearest. We're going to find the magpie in the nest."

Simone looked about the drawing-room as though she distrusted even the walls. It was second nature for her to be cautious.

"Is there any sign of the rural guard?"

"Not yet," whispered de Barestan. "Let him stay out there on the road. He may see something worth reporting!"

Simone was still apprehensive.

"Did anyone you know see us come in?"

"Don't be absurd! You think I don't know this house? You saw how I skirted the gatekeeper's lodge in getting into the meadows." He pointed to the door at his right. "That leads into the bedroom of Billie." He turned and pointed across the room. "And that one leads to the room Henry's occupying. I'm sure, that's the way I planned it."

Simone glanced at him admiringly.

"What assurance you have to invite them here this way. And I'd like to say, what confidence you have to count upon their falling into your bear-pit."

De Barestan tip-toed about as though preening his feathers over his cleverness.

"I pride myself that I know human nature," he told her. "I had that all in mind when I set the scene and worked out the routing of my plan, and if I'm not mistaken I have the excellent chance to trap my amateur of 'five to seven' in the pit."

Holding up his hand for caution he tip-toed across the room to Billie's door.

"But—dearest——" questioned Simone.

The Marquis jumped guiltily.

"Chut!" he squelched her. Then he leaned over and listened at the keyhole like some maid or butler keeping tab on the family doings. Shaking his head in indecision, he tried to look through the keyhole.

Simone couldn't keep back a slight chuckle.

"You do that so naturally."

De Barestan overlooked her comment. It was a question whether he actually heard it.

"I don't hear anything and I surely can't see anything."

"The parlourmaid probably saw us and gave the alarm, put them on guard."

"The maid wouldn't know me," said de Barestan curtly. "I told you I knew human nature. That was

part of my plan. Billie has no doubt engaged new ones since my departure."

Now Simone permitted herself more than a mere chuckle.

"Don't laugh so loudly," cautioned de Barestan, "someone will hear."

"I can't help it, you Baron Munchausen! Your departure for Morocco! She suddenly became alert. "Look out! Someone is coming!" she stepped to de Barestan's side to give the impression that they'd just entered.

Amelie, in the doorway, halted in surprise. She exclaimed:

"Oh!"

De Barestan's manner was quite gay and at home.

"Good evening, Mademoiselle. My dear friend, Lefumez, he is here?" He went on chattily, in the manner of an old crony. "You see, I am one of his oldest friends. Madame and I"—he motioned towards Simone—"were passing the château of the Marquis de Barestan and we suddenly remembered that Henry was visiting here, so we stopped to take the chance of wishing him a pleasant how-d'ye-do. We even came in by the park, so that we could better surprise him."

Amelie beamed with understanding.

"M. Lefumez has just gone out, Monsieur," she informed the Marquis.

"Alone?" asked Simone, not too pointedly.

"No, Madame," replied the unsuspecting Amelie,

"he went out with Mme la Marquise."

De Barestan beamed back at the maid with good-natured impatience.

"Ah, zut!" he exclaimed. "That's a nuisance, I've just brought him some news of his home."

Amelie shook her head and stammered.

"Oh! He will regret that considerably, Monsieur."

Simone shrugged.

"What a pity," she observed. "I would have been delighted to have seen him."

"I too am sorry," announced the Marquis. "I had an awfully good story to tell him. One that he could have chuckled over with rare delight. I heard it at our club. It isn't true, of course. A Scotchman got the best of a Frenchman. The Frenchman ran away with the Scotchman's wife and——"

Simone coughed warningly.

Amelie bent forward eagerly.

The Marquis sighed and clipped himself short. "I say, what wretched luck!"

"My faith," suggested Amelie, "if Madame and Monsieur would only wait."

De Barestan took out his wallet and thumbed the bills. He carefully selected a hundred franc note and passed it to the maid.

"Look here, Mademoiselle," he asked, "what is your name?"

"Amelie," she told him. "Oh, thank you, Monsieur."

De Barestan went on. His curiosity about an old friend's affairs seemed quite normal.

"Listen, my good girl, which is the room of my old friend, Lefumez?"

Amelie pointed to the door at the left.

"There, Monsieur."

"He is the only guest here with the Marquise?" asked Simone, almost indifferently, "she isn't entertaining a week-end party? Oh, I know how it is in these smart châteaux." As though to disarm any possible suspicion of the maid, she added: "I follow all the doings of the smart set in the papers."

Amelie, instantly recognizing the type of social climber, smiled.

"He is the only guest here now, Madame."

De Barestan winked at the maid.

"Ah," he nodded in a man-of-the-world fashion. "Amelie, between us, my good friend Lefumez doesn't make a mistake"—here he cleared his throat as a preliminary to the rest of his speech—"doesn't make a mistake which room he sleeps in? I know him, this gay young friend of mine."

Amelie appeared genuinely surprised. "Oh, Monsieur, I never——"

De Barestan came closer.

"It's all right, you can speak openly in front of us."

"Yes, Monsieur. No, Monsieur!" said Amelie confusedly.

"Well, a smart maid like you would know," said Simone encouragingly.

Amelie liked flattery. It loosened her tongue.

"You're right, I would know. You understand, from the little give-away details, Madame. I well know the life of the château. This isn't my first job with smart people. I worked last summer with the Marquise de la Mothe Sanglé. It wasn't like it is here, that's true. One found collar buttons in the beds of the single ladies almost every morning, and neck-pieces and eyebrow tweezers on the night-tables of the gentlemen, hairpins and other little night tracks. One might succeed in fooling the hostess, but no one pulls the wool over the eyes of the maid."

De Barestan turned to Simone.

"Didn't I say she was a smart girl, nothing escapes her eye. Now, Amelie, here with the mistress of this house and her only guest—no?"

The last word emphasized quite insinuatingly. In spite of the avalanche of praise, Amelie decided to stick to the truth.

"Ah, Monsieur," she prattled, "if Monsieur only knew the precautions these two take every night."

Simone absent-mindedly picturing herself under similar circumstances, jumped to conclusions.

"To see each other?" she asked.

"No, Madame," Amelie corrected her, "not to see each other."

"But in the daytime?" persisted de Barestan.

"In the daytime?" asked Amelie as if that were beyond her experience.

"Yes," de Barestan went on, "my friend has the reputation of being quite a matinée idol with the fawns in the smart sets."

"Oh, Monsieur, the day here is exactly like the night. Nothing goes on that is suspicious."

"I've forgotten," confessed Simone, "is the Marquise married?"

"Yes, Madame. Her husband is in Morocco. That old boy can sleep with both ears and both eyes closed, he doesn't have to worry about what's going on here—I mean, what isn't going on. I've seen about everything in the eight years I've been in service, but the precautions these two take here are worth mentioning."

"But what do they actually do?" de Barestan blurted out.

"Oh," continued the garrulous maid, "I couldn't tell you what they do, strictly speaking. M. Lefumez talks about it himself. I'm on the job until about five o'clock, as a rule. I can keep things to myself, if there are things to keep. In any case, if my mistress's husband took the same precautions in Morocco, the ladies out there would never be embarrassed with unwelcome Moroccans! But I chatter too much. You're so sympathetic it's natural. If Monsieur and Madame will wait here in the drawing-room, M. Lefumez won't be long. Monsieur and Madame will excuse me."

Amelie lit the lamps on the table and rearranged a pillow or so on the couch and left the room.

VIII

It was quite dark outside now. The Marquis, furious, paced up and down the room like a caged lion. He sputtered.

"What foolishness! What rubbish! What absolute rot!"

Simone was in better frame of mind.

"See," she scolded, "your detective is an imbecile, a congenital idiot!"

"What could you expect? Don't be unreasonable! The detective couldn't climb in the window with them. No doubt, he observed all he could. He probably decided that there was a good chance to catch them late in the afternoon. Well, he was mistaken, he probably was judging by Paris. The thing that makes me sore, is that I had to call out a rural policeman to set a watch on them, and I don't see where it's done a bit of good so far."

"Why hasn't he? He's an expert in snares!"

"Because you haven't a right to prove a flagrant act after the sun goes down."

"Why, that's idiotic!"

"But it's the law."

"Hell! What have I always told you? A fine bag of tricks your wife has turned out to be! Not such a fool. She takes her precautions. I wonder, Edmond, what did that maid actually wish to say?"

De Barestan was still marching up and down the room. He turned and snorted his answer.

"I don't know a damn thing."

"What does actually go on here at night?"

He turned on her again.

"How on earth would I know? I'm no clairvoyant, I can't read between the sheets! All there is to swear about, is that there's nothing to swear to."

Simone frowned.

"After all, the chatter of that maid isn't the word of an angel. Maids and gospel truth rarely go together. Tell me, Edmond, what would prevent your friend from slipping into your wife's room in the middle of the night and slipping back into his own before daylight? That maid is silly, all lovers don't leave their shorts hanging on the chair of milady, nor their false teeth on her bureau top."

De Barestan stopped short in his pacing.

"Well, go on—after that, what then?"

"Your wife could fool you without your knowing it."

"Just saying that doesn't help me."

"Then why did you go to all this trouble of laying this trap, in order that it might happen?"

The Marquis's patience was at a low ebb.

"Simone!" he scolded. "It certainly isn't very nice of you to talk this way."

Simone decided to smooth him down.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said, "I'm in an awful state of nerves. I came here expecting to assist at the climax of an adventure and nothing has happened. It is natural that I would lose my patience."

"My dear little Simone, be calm like I am, be patient. You know that I love you, you see to what pains I'm going, trying to liberate myself." He came closer and took her in his arms. "Come, is it my fault that things don't go well?"

Simone was unhappy. She nestled against his breast.

"I tell you, Edmond, your wife is invulnerable. I'm afraid she's stronger than we are. She'll never give you your liberty."

"You little rascal, how much of a woman you are. Now you say my wife will never give me my divorce and only a few minutes ago you told me Henry was slipping into her room at night. Is that a woman's definition of the word invulnerable?"

Simone pushed him away from her.

"I don't know what I'm saying!"

The more despondent her manner became, the quicker he recovered his good humour. He drew her back into his arms.

"Come into my arms, Simone, calm your nerves, there, there, dearest, all is not lost. If, as it is quite

possible, and probable, Henry is passing the night with Billie, we will manage somehow to get evidence that will permit me to secure my divorce. I'll have to talk it over with my detective."

"That one—he is an ass!"

"Then I will find another. Let's don't give up. In the daytime, evidently there's nothing doing. It is too dangerous with the servants about. The night, well, we'll see what we don't see. Anyway, how do we know that Henry hasn't crossed the palm of that maid with silver. Now it struck me a moment ago that she went out of her way to defend him."

Simone took courage.

"You think so?"

"Surely, my love. There're many things we don't know for certain. Billie's sojourn in the country isn't over. Come, dry your tears."

"I haven't been crying, I'm not a baby."

"Well, buck up your courage. I've a hunch that we'll catch those two. Let them dream on. It's unnatural that two healthy young people can resist for six weeks the growing pains of passion."

The Marquis's broad simile made Simone giggle.

"You'll be the death of me, Edmond! It isn't wise for us to stay here until the wick burns out. We must keep them believing you're still in Morocco."

De Barestan pinched her cheeks affectionately.

"You're right," he said. "You go first and tell that rural guard out there that he can report to me in

my car down the road. I'll stay here and tell Amelie that I can't wait for my friend any longer. You understand, I'll make it look all right. I'll leave some sort of a name."

Simone nodded and hurriedly went out of the terrace door, first looking to right and left to be sure that no one was out there.

De Barestan rang the bell. He walked about the room noting familiar paintings on the wall.

Amelie came in.

The Marquis, turning:

"Amelie, my friend M. Lefumez is too long in coming back, my wife has gone."

"You are leaving, Monsieur?"

"Yes," said de Barestan, "it is getting late. I must return to Deauville. I have several things to do there to-night."

"Whom shall I say called?"

"Tell M. Lefumez that his friends, M. and Mme Pelissier, were here and were extremely sorry to miss him. We will write him later." He searched his pockets. "My word, I haven't a card with me."

Amelie went to the writing desk. "Here's a piece of paper. If Monsieur would leave his name. Wait, I will look for a pen." She looked about the writing desk and then left the room.

Simone stood in the terrace door.

"It is done, Edmond, the rural snooper has gone, he will see you later. Let us go, dearest. I am afraid

of meeting them. And that would knock your little scheme into a cocked hat. Hurry!"

De Barestan sat down, fumbled a bit in his pockets and brought out a fountain-pen.

"There, I knew I'd find it."

He wrote on the piece of paper.

"I'll leave our names, M. and Mme Pelissier." He looked up at Simone. "Amelie has gone to find a pen."

Simone was so impatient that she made de Barestan nervous.

"I beg of you," she admonished. "I've a premonition that——" She went to the terrace door and looked out into the park. It was dusk but she could still see. "Oh!" she cried out in a choked voice. "There they are, they're walking slowly, no, it's only one. He is getting closer, I think it's Lefumez."

De Barestan jumped up excitedly.

"Damn!" he swore.

IX

AMELIE came in with the pen. She also had a bottle and some glasses on a tray. After all, one must be nice to Parisian gentlemen who tip you generously! Simone and de Barestan stood there with their eyes

fixed on the terrace door as though caught in a trap.
It was a tense moment.

In the doorway suddenly appeared an odd looking old man, perhaps in his sixties, who had a leather cap on and a well-worn jacket. Over his right shoulder was a horse blanket, none too clean, and under his arm was gripped a dark cloth bag full of papers. He entered the drawing-room much at home and suddenly stopped upon seeing de Barestan and Simone.

Amelie was the first to speak.

"Good evening, Monsieur," she welcomed.

The elderly man bowed gravely.

"Good evening, Mademoiselle Amelie."

His manner was reminiscent of the punctilioseness of a court-room. He again noticed the two visitors and again he bowed ceremoniously. He looked more like a jack on a stick than a human being, whose wooden joints were controlled by a string.

"How do you do, Madame—Monsieur. I have the honour to greet you."

All of which mystified the Marquis. He tried as best he could, to return the same precise bow.

"Good evening, Monsieur. To whom have I the honour?"

The queerly dressed old chap stiffened even more woodenly over his own importance.

"I am Maître Sideral, Bailiff of the Civil Court of Pont-l'Eveque. I venture to ask, Monsieur, who are you?"

"M. and Mme Pelissier, from Paris."

The Marquis felt a pressure on his arm. Simone was pulling him aside. She whispered in his ear.

"What does this mean, Edmond?"

De Barestan answered her in the same lowered tone.

"My dear, I haven't the slightest idea." Clearing his voice he turned to the "jack-on-the-string man," bowed again to him as though they were all figures in some weird pantomime. He then looked at the maid and addressed her direct. "Thanks, Amelie. I will leave a word for my friend, Henry, and I will ring for you——"

Amelie had been in service long enough to take a hint at first bounce. Her expression was as though she had said aloud: "you prefer to have me out of the way, you've tried to pump me about your friend, now you're going to quiz Maître Sideral; all right, you tipped me and I suppose I ought to do something for you." With the faint suspicion of a smile on her face she turned and left the room.

Maître Sideral, still puffed up over his own importance, sat down quietly as he began to speak. From his exaggerated manner one would have thought that he was some distinguished judge sitting upon the bench before whom Simone and de Barestan had been brought. He cleared his throat pompously.

"Well, Monsieur and Madame," he boomed, "you're no doubt friends of the châtelaine?"

De Barestan was not to be out-foxed with the mock solemnity of the scene. He addressed Maître Sideral respectfully.

"Or to be more exact," he informed him, "we are friends of M. Henry Lefumez, whom we understand is the only guest, at present, in the château of the Marquise. We were leaving, regretting that we hadn't found him, just as you arrived."

Maître Sideral waved his hand in a generous and somewhat pompous gesture.

"Charming fellow, that friend of yours, Lefumez, Monsieur," he opined. "Good chap, nice sort. Who improves on acquaintance. I meet a great many people, of course, in my official capacity and I'm naturally sharpened in my judgments of first acquaintances. The first day I met your friend, you pardon me if I'm woefully frank with you and Madame, he appeared to me to be a—what you might term, a little balmy in the bean-croft."

Simone, who had a wide acquaintance of the popular slang of the day, found this a new one.

"I beg your pardon," she began.

Maître Sideral was always willing to clarify his meanings.

"You follow me, a bit off his onion, cuckoo. That, frankly, was my first impression. I thought his wits had mildewed! And then, little by little, I began to believe that he really did know what he was about, you understand my process of thinking—that he was

a serious chap, in the right, well poised, normally balanced, nothing in common with those little Paris whipper-snappers, you understand."

Simone caught an idea that dashed through her head.

"Pardon, Maître Sideral," she said, and her manner gave that odd individual the instant impression that the lady was appealing to the Seat of Wisdom for enlightenment.

Maître Sideral came down out of his balloon of vanity, for the lady was talking. He hoped he hadn't missed any of her homage.

"Pardon," he heard her speaking, "you were saying that little by little you became convinced that Henry Lefumez—you are often here, then?"

In supreme good humour, Maître Sideral beamed upon her.

"Every evening, Madame."

"What's that, every night?" asked de Barestan.

"Yes, every night."

"You're invited by M. Lefumez?" demanded Simone.

"No. I am here by request of Mme la Marquise de Barestan."

The Marquis's attention was riveted.

"Oh, you come to play bridge with them."

Maître Sideral stiffened, if it were possible for him to become more wooden than usual.

"I never play cards, Monsieur. Ever since I've

been told that cards were invented to distract Charles the Fool—you recall Charles VI, that has prejudiced me all my life against any form of card playing."

But Simone was still curious. Still on the trail of that idea which had struck in the back of her mind.

"Then why on earth do you come here every evening?"

"My faith! I can at least tell you two that. I come to pass the night."

"What!" barked the Marquis.

"Pass the night here in the château?" queried Simone excitedly.

The old man responded to her excitement. It was music to his ears that these two unimportant people were so much fussed up over one of the mere details of his busy life.

"Yes," he informed them gravely, "here in the château." His manner became mysterious, as though he were imparting to them the heavily guarded combination to the safe in the Bank of England. "I come in quietly, like this." He got up to illustrate and tiptoed a step or two, then returned to his chair. "Like that," he furthered, "until the stroke of the hour. To be exact, nine o'clock in the morning."

Simone turned to the Marquis.

"What did I tell you!" she said pointedly. "And you're not a personal friend of our friend, M. Lefumez?"

The Maître shook his head.

"I never heard of him before I came here. I—er—the joke is on me—" Here he went into a fit of laughter. "I even took him for the Marquis de Barestan—but it appears that M. le Marquis is over in Morocco. Which I'm reliably informed is—off the coast of South America. Why he should go so far away from so charming a wife is quite beyond my official experience. Some men push stupidity to an extreme!"

De Barestan bristled, though he didn't say what he thought. That they had to waste all this time talking to this pompous nincompoop got on his nerves. Still, the chap might know something and in a few hours at this rate they might squeeze a fact or so out of him.

"Well, there's no accounting for husbands," de Barestan observed philosophically. "I even knew one who would have gladly gone on a rocket to the moon to get away from his greater half! So much for jesting! Then, Maître Sideral, tell us what brings you every evening here to this house?"

"Ah!" said Maître Sideral, with judicial clarity. He cautiously glanced at Amelie, who was just entering. "Professional secret," he murmured.

SIMONE and the Marquis stood dumbfounded by Maître Sideral's side watching what Amelie was doing. She was pushing through the door what appeared to be a folding bed. Maître Sideral, not to be outdone in courtesy, fully aware of the pulchritude of Amelie, rushed forward to help her. He was evidently near-sighted for he absent-mindedly took hold of Amelie instead of the folding bed. A pleasant squeak from her corrected the error.

"Oh, yes, the bed," as he transferred his grip.

They put the contraption down in the middle of the drawing-room, while Simone and de Barestan disconcertedly watched them. Sideral and Amelie finally got the infernal thing unfolded and into normal, usable shape. Simone whispered to the Marquis.

"What does this comedy mean?"

"I'm afraid to understand, alas."

Maître Sideral was speaking to the pretty maid, who was busy making the bed.

"Thanks, Mademoiselle, for having changed the pillow. The other was as hard as my mother-in-law's heart. This one is just the proper softness!" Despite the presence of the Marquis and Simone, he chuckled her under the chin. Then suddenly becoming aware of M. and Mme Pelissier, he reverted to his former

tone. "I prefer a pillow stuffed with seaweed, it makes such a pleasant sniffing through the night."

Amelie had more than an eye for the awe-inspiring Maître Sideral. He evidently cut a merry caper with the young lady. She eyed him admiringly.

"It is a pleasure, Maître Sideral, to be of service to you. The bedding—you are sure you won't be cold—with the bedding I mean. The nights, you know, are very fresh."

"Oh, the nights," said Maître Sideral, for once confused. "Perhaps I could be warmer, but why worry about that until the middle of the night? You are very thoughtful and I again thank you. Please don't stop thinking of my comfort."

All of this was too much for the impatient de Barestan.

"The ass," he hissed to Simone. "If I were Amelie I'd rather sleep with—in the same house with the sacred white elephant of Siam than that consummate, moronic, straw-stuffed old nanny goat!"

Simone laughed.

"You're expressing yourself well, Edmond, even I endorse your sentiments. Cough a little bit and break up this touching scene. Of course you observed the way he took hold of the bed."

"That's the only good judgment he's shown so far," the Marquis said as he began to cough vigorously. Maître Sideral was in the midst of one of his speeches.

"No, I beg of you, I have an old comforter of my own, which for that fact could cover a double bed."

Whereupon the Marquis went into a coughing fit. Amelie left the room and Maître Sideral came towards the Pelissiers.

"I have a cold myself," he said, "but I'm coughing better to-night."

"It is nothing," mumbled de Barestan, signalling Simone with his eye to continue quizzing Sideral. Simone conjured up one of her prettiest smiles.

"Listen, Maître Sideral, tell us why you come here every evening—outside your appreciation of feminine beauty."

It was Sideral now who went into a coughing spell.

"Madame," he said, when he'd recovered sufficiently, "I, as a bailiff, draw up affidavits." He reverted to his mysterious manner. "But, my dear Madame Pelissier, between you and me and the devil—no, your husband—never have I been requested in all my legal experience to draw up an affidavit of this type." He reached over and tapped the black cloth bag, which was apparently full of papers. They stuck out at all corners. "This," he informed them, "is full of affidavits."

Simone was astonished.

"Affidavits about what?"

But Maître Sideral was busy trying to untie the knots of the bag as though he were going to show them the contents. The slight pause gave de Bares-

ton a chance to draw Simone aside. He spoke hurriedly in lowered tones.

"I understand this numskull. Let me handle him, Simone, I'm going to twist him around my finger. I'm going to unhinge his tongue. I'll pump him for all he knows." He raised his voice. "Maître Sideral, never mind untying it, your word is sufficient. Do me the honour, the pleasure to clink glasses with me."

The Marquis took up from the table the bottle which Amelie had so thoughtfully left in sight, and rapidly filled two glasses. He motioned Sideral to take one.

"I've been told that Mme la Marquise possesses some Calvados," he reached over and held up a glass, "that would make even an old man jump the wall of a nunnery—to wish the ladies a pleasant evening! I think this is the article!"

"My faith! Have I overlooked something," said Maître Sideral, taking up his glass. "Monsieur, I will refuse you nothing, as long as I remain sober. Fortunately there're no walls present." Then his educated eye lit upon the fascinating Simone. "Ah! We'll have to wish you a pleasant good evening, Mme Pelissier."

De Barestan, despite his self-control, glowered at this.

"My dear fellow," he resumed in his former "bench to the bar" attitude, "since they tell me

that prohibition is prohibited in New York City, I find myself more and more in a drinking mood. I clink your glass, sir."

The Marquis, his humour outwardly restored, held his glass up and touched that of the Maître.

"Well, whatever they swiggle in New York," observed the Marquis, who wished to give this silly ass, Sideral, the impression that he was dealing with a real man-of-the-world, "this sun-kissed French nectar certainly wasn't imported from a Hollywood tile bathtub, as my fine friend, Chevalier would phrase it!" He smacked his lips appreciatively. "Famous! A bit of the old stuff brings new life to an old heart!"

Evidently the Marquis's worldliness had struck a bull's eye with Sideral.

"You strike me as a man who knows the real thing when he sips it as the tom-cat said when he lapped the saucer of real cream."

De Barestan, trying to check a wry expression, looked merrily over at Simone.

"Didn't I tell you what a jolly good fellow the Maître is—so witty, so much the man of the world, I mean the man of affairs. There with the right quip at the wrong—I mean the right moment. A square head—er—a square peg in any hole—I mean, round hole. You're a rare one, Sideral, I haven't laughed so since as a boy, I saw my good old nurse skin-the-cat on a limb of a tree in the garden! And the limb broke—the limb of the tree!" To carry

out the illustration, the Marquis gave several barks, which were supposed to be laughs. He reached over and took the bottle.

"So many of our legal minds have no such sense of humour. Maître, I insist," he said, "another little stroke of Calvados. We are very sympathetic, you know, you and I, apparently, have the same tastes. My dear Sideral, I love to hear you talk. You carry the air of an old philosopher who understands life and the manner of living it."

"Thanks, that's what I often tell my wife, but she's hard of hearing."

Simone, for the moment forgotten, they clinked their glasses again, gleefully. Sideral clucked after draining his glass.

"Bah—the world is small and men are all the same, the same kind of men, you understand. Fellows at Pont-l'Eveque and men at Montevideo or sound fellows at Timbuktu. Men are men the world over, especially when there's good wine to drink to loosen their tongues. So, M. Felissier——"

"Pelissier," Barestan corrected him. Smiling at his first sign of success.

"Whatever you say," continued Sideral. "So you haven't the slightest idea why they have me here every night for affidavits?" He suddenly became aware of the presence of Mme Pelissier, Simone. He waved his hand to her, inclusively. "Women are great company too—charming woman! Wine, women and

song, an invincible combination! I can sing—or could years ago. A very touching voice!"

De Barestan shivered.

"Some other time," he suggested.

"I haven't the slightest idea either, why you come here," said Simone, trying to appear good-natured and wishing that the Maître would come to the facts in the case: she nudged de Barestan.

"Come on, Maître Sideral, you who know life so damned well," de Barestan encouraged. "These evenings here. You intrigue me, and it is very amusing to my wife."

Evidently Sideral had a conscience; it bit him now.

"Well, come to think of it, I—I—perhaps I shouldn't let the bag out of the cat. Ha! I mean, the cag out of the bat, yes!"

"Oh, go on, old man, between us, there's nothing mysterious about it. Madame and I are among M. Lefumez's oldest friends."

"Surely," Simone encouraged, "we'd like a good laugh on Henry. It won't go any further."

"Monsieur, Madame, without meaning any offence. Now I see that you're both from Paris, yes? Then nothing, of course, can astonish you! Nothing can take you off your feet! Well, I don't mind confessing to you two, that I am just a bailiff here in Pont-l'Eveque. You might say, in a way, a small fish in a little pond."

"Oh, no, Maître Sideral."

" You're too modest! "

" I insist," Sideral went on, " but I'm going to astonish you just the same." He reached over, poured himself out another drink and drained it. " My dear sir, what Calvados," he smacked his lips repeatedly. " It would loosen the tongue of a mute. I mean, mule—a mute mule! "

" Then you will explain to us, Maître Sideral," purred Simone, in her puissiest tones, " why you came here to-night."

" This is very comical, this story, you two will enjoy it, I'm sure," ballyhooed Sideral. " Picture to yourselves that I come here evenings to the château for the last eighteen days." He paused for a moment and looked towards the bottle of Calvados. Always brandy was a weakness with him—especially that of the apple—symbol of human temptation. Simone tried to urge the old slow-coach on.

" The last eighteen days," she repeated, " but why? "

" At the formal request of the Mme la Marquise de Barestan," announced Sideral in heavily important tone. " Of course you two couldn't guess in a thousand years, why—no? You never could guess, don't try—listen, come closer, this is rich! To bear witness that the beautiful Marquise is faithful to her husband," stimulated by the Calvados he added, " her own husband, you understand, and that she doesn't cheat with your friend, M. Lefumez. Ha! Ha! can you beat that? A wife gathering proof for her absent

husband that she's one hundred per cent. virtuous while he's away! Come a little closer and get this, it's magnificent. Mme de Barestan herself, said to me one day, like this: 'Maître Sideral, I am forced to take my precautions, one can never tell what will come up before a married woman. I wish you to come officially and sleep in my house every night. Here in my drawing-room, between this door that leads to my room and that one that leads to the door of M. Lefumez, my guest. I want you to be here all night, so that you have ocular proof, after you've bolted our doors from the outside every evening, that M. Lefumez sleeps in his room and I in mine. Each morning, you will make out for me your affidavit to that effect. You will make it out in full detail, stamp it and hand it to me.' There, M. and Mme Pelissier, *hein?* Isn't that an extraordinary story? This is perhaps the first time a bailiff has been called to bear testimony to the virtue of a married woman, isn't it? And it is an American girl who has done it!"

Simone bent forward so that her head came close to the Marquis. She gazed at him fiercely.

"It is incredible!" she said in a very low voice, as she clutched his wrist. "What a pest! What a nuisance!"

It was a good thing that Maître Sideral had his eye upon the bottle of Calvados. The Marquis returned Simone's expression. If anything, he was the more wrought up of the two.

"Well," he said in his lowest tone, "that is certainly that! I warned you that she wasn't as innocent as she looked—in plotting."

"Sidestepping a plot, no. The little beast! Clever one at that," Simone hissed.

Barestan took a look at Sideral. Not having been invited to renew his acquaintance with the Calvados, Sideral's attention was wavering. De Barestan cleared his throat.

"My dear Maître Sideral," he said, as near good-naturedly as he could, "you're not ragging us? Come on now—that's serious, all that you've just told us?"

Sideral was off again. He tried to recover his gay manner.

"You ask if it's serious?" he remarked. "My word of honour, yes, too serious. Listen, I'm going to show you. After all, seeing is believing." He reached over and succeeded in untying the knots in the black cloth bag. Opened, it disclosed a mass of papers. The Marquis and Simone gazed at them as though hypnotized.

"Please understand that if I had been called to take my oath that the husband had been wronged, that his wife was an adulteress, I wouldn't say a word about the affair. After all, we bailiffs have our ethics, but when the whole thing is to prove the virtue of a wife—ah, one can never have enough testimony! Look." He reached down and loosened the string and drew out one of the affidavits. "Take a peep at

this, better come over and read it. It's worth while."

The Marquis was quite impatient. He waved his hand.

" You read it, Maître Sideral," he ordered, " we're pressed somewhat for time."

Sideral upset his glass. There had been a wee drop left in it. It stained the table-cloth vividly. De Barestan refilled the glass. Sideral drained it at a gulp; no use taking chances!

" We, Jean Marie Celestin Auguste Sideral, Bailiff at the Civil Court of Pont-l'Eveque, at the request of, etc., etc.," Maître Sideral started in his best professional monotone, " bear witness that on this seventeenth day of July, nineteen hundred thirty-one, Mme de Barestan, wife of Edmond, the Marquis de Barestan, entered her bedroom at twenty-one o'clock, thirty-five minutes, precisely. After having shaken the hand of M. Henry Lefumez; that afterwards the aforesaid M. Henry Lefumez went into his own room, on the opposite side of the drawing-room, at twenty-one o'clock, thirty-seven minutes, after having shaken the hand of the Marquise de Barestan; whereupon we duly and personally locked each one in their respective rooms and sealed their doors with a band of paper; that during the night no one came out or went in either room on either side of the drawing-room; that on the following morning at ten minutes past eight o'clock, precisely, we made out the personal affidavit to serve to whomsoever it should concern, etc., etc. There! I have

eighteen like that. Come, look yourself, Madame. They're all the same. With the exception of the minutes. The only one that's really different is the one for the night of the nineteenth to the twentieth of July, where there was a special incident noted by me."

De Barستان's face lit up with hope.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "now we get down to cases. What incident?"

"Wait, here it is. All the rest, as I said, are just the same. Here's the one of the nineteenth to the twentieth. You'll note what it says here—that about one o'clock in the morning we were awakened by M. Lefumez, who asked permission to go out."

"What for?" asked Simone suspiciously.

"Why? Well, normally, to—to—well, there it is." He continued. "And we have personally and legally returned M. Lefumez to his room, which we reclosed, replaced and rechecked with seals and so forth and so forth. *Voilà!*"

"So much the worse," commented de Barستان disappointedly.

"You will permit me, Maître Sideral, to have a word with my husband."

Simone drew the Marquis aside. Sideral, who for the moment had forgotten the nearness of the Calvados, strained his ears trying to catch what she said, but her voice was too low.

"Listen," she whispered to Edmond. "There's only one thing to do. You'd better get this ass really

drunk. If he were dead drunk to-night, those two will probably take advantage and do what I hope they will do, and to-morrow morning you'll have them where you want them—in your mouse-trap. If this simpleton were blotto he would cease to be the safeguard."

"That's a splendid idea," de Barestan whispered, "it may work out fine. Let me handle him, when the proper time comes."

"You must do it now! Don't wait."

The Marquis turned to the bailiff giving an authenticity to their whispered conversation. "You're right, my dear, it's a great joke on our friend Henry. Another glass, Maître Sideral! I believe there is yet some Calvados."

Sideral needed no urging.

"My faith, that's a long bottle! You two are a couple after my own heart. I knew you were the right sort as soon as I met you. This is beginning to get good."

"We're very grateful for the funny thing you've told us," graciously said Simone. "Go ahead, drink, you don't have to clink glasses with me."

Maître Sideral was busy filling his glass. He was not to be outdone in his manners. He held his glass aloft.

"With a charming Parisienne like you, Madame, I assure you it is the pleasure of a king to clink."

"Maître Sideral," she bantered, "you know how

to hit the bull's-eye of a woman's vanity with the first arrow. We, from Paris, could teach you little."

"Just what I was thinking," murmured the Marquis, raising his glass. "Maître Sideral knows a thing or two about life."

They clinked and drank.

"Look here!" said Sideral, putting his empty glass down.

"Oh, but that is excellent stuff," said de Barestan, clearing his throat and putting his half-filled glass down.

"Believe it or not, Madame," adjured Maître Sideral with a hiccup for emphasis. "This is the first time in my life that I performed my duties in a condition like this. You know I have half an idea that I've drunk a little bit too much." He added another hiccup.

"Oh, not at all."

"You exaggerate."

"I've seized lots of furniture but I never seized lovers in the flagrant act of chastity! Awfully curious, eh? I don't mind confessing to you two that it's actually a great pleasure to come here every night. The place is extremely pleasant, the people here charming, even the wine has a way about it!"

Sideral rattled on. There was no stopping him. He was all wound up like an eight-day clock!

"I go on guard in this comfortable drawing-room, as you might say, between a lovely wife and her

charming young lad of a guest. I am waited upon by a rosy-cheeked, deliciously formed, thoroughly amiable soubrette, who sees that I'm comfortably bedded, who responds to my slightest wish and who brings me my little breakfast in the morning so that I can eat here in my folding bed. It's life and I have the idea that I'm living it out in full—you follow my meaning, that I'm almost one of the family. Really, it is wonderful! It is my first experience under such delightful surroundings."

" You've never been tempted to shut your eyes on what your charming hostess is actually doing? " asked de Barestan with a suggestive grin.

" My word! " snorted Maître Sideral. " Between us, yes; after all, they are both young, the husband, who must be an old fool, is out of the way; you know the old saying : The time, the place and the woman ! And there's plenty of opportunity—in the daytime, or better in the night, when that would give them the proper atmosphere."

" Well, why not give them that chance? "

" Yes, why not? " echoed Maître Sideral. " I will put my head on the pillow and sign the affidavit in the morning just the same."

Simone emptied the bottle into a glass and offered it to Sideral.

" Do that to-night, Maître Sideral. It is a shame to torture two young people like that. After all, human nature is human nature."

"My faith! You're right," Maître Sideral hiccuped. "If they have the desire, you have my word, I won't peep on them. It's so nice, young people who are crazy about each other and who have been forced to abstain for conventional reasons. Oh, I was young myself, years ago, Madame. Would you believe it, at twenty-five I didn't have any fear of petticoats! Now we're all married and we can be quite frank. Damn it! When I was young, if my wife was on one side and I was on the other—well—well, I would cry: 'Mme Sideral, if you will not come to the mountain, I'm damn certain the mountain will come to you!'"

De Barestan looked pleased.

"Great! Then it is all understood. To-night you will encourage them without letting them know."

Maître Sideral peered closely at the Marquis.

"Yes, to-night. All that amuses you, you say. Funny, you don't look amused at all."

He tried to mix chuckles and hiccups and didn't succeed very well. De Barestan became confidential. He took the bailiff's arm.

"Maître Sideral, in my heart I am very much amused. Henry is one of my oldest and dearest friends. This situation strikes me as good comedy. 'Pon my word, I cannot picture the husband of Madame de Barestan, the old fool, you understand. Yes, it would give me great pleasure to know that he'd been cheated. But our friend Lefumez doesn't come." He looked at his watch perfunctorily. "We are

pressed for time. I'm afraid we'll have to bid you good-bye."

"So soon?"

Sideral got up and bowed and recovered his balance with difficulty. He began to arrange his bed.

"Quick, let's leave!" whispered Simone to the Marquis. "He's spiffy. Our plan goes splendidly."

"You believe he will——"

"Look at him."

"Yes."

"We must go. It is dangerous to remain here any longer." She turned towards Sideral. "Adieu, Maître Sideral." She looked at the bottle. "It is a shame there is no more!"

Maître Sideral by this time was humming to himself, which, mixed with hiccups and chuckles, produced rather a weird effect.

"Good-bye, Madame. Don't worry, I will have Amelie bring in some more if I get thirsty during the night!"

"Au revoir, Monsieur. Don't forget—to-night!"
Maître Sideral looked dazed.

"To-night? You may be sure I'll get thir——"

"No—to be good to the young lovers."

"Oh—yes! Count on me, M. Felissier, I'll tell your friend M. Lefumez that you both called to-night to see him. M. and Mme Felissier."

De Barestan corrected him. "Pelissier. That's it, fine, good night."

As they stood in the doorway Simone said to the Marquis:

"He carries his liquor like a Polish soldier! If your wife and Lefumez don't profit by this night—we are lost."

"Just a minute, friends! I feel like singing 'La Cocotte de Toulouse' in three verses! Don't miss this!"

But the *cher maître's* audience had left. He was alone with the empty bottle. He shrugged his shoulders and reached for the Marquis's half-filled glass which he maladroitly knocked over.

"I know how to handle those Parisiennes! I bet I amaze them."

XI

MAÎTRE SIDERAL, well into his cups, spread his comforter over the folding bed. He patted the pillow. Then stood back and gazed at it reflectively. On second thought he added another pillow from the couch. Then he took off some of his clothes, put on his cotton night-cap and got into his slippers.

He got into his bed, just as Billie and Henry entered very gaily from the terrace. Lefumez was correctly

shaven and well dressed. Billie had put on a becoming little dress and was quite transformed. They greeted Sideral happily.

"Good evening, my dear Bailiff," said Billie.

"How goes it, Sideral?" greeted Lefumez.

"I—I salute you Mme de—de—de Barestan, and you also, M. Lef—Lefumez."

Billie and Henry exchanged looks.

"Anything startling at Pont-l'Eveque?"

Maître Sideral waved his hand.

"My faith! No. Oh, yes, now I come to think of it, the butcher surprised his wife in the arms of the tax collector."

"Maître Sideral! A drama in real life?"

"No—no drama at all, purely business. The butcher refused to pay the collector his taxes, he insisted that his wife already had a receipt for them! Ah, Mme de Barestan, sly Cupid is coming into his own in this region."

Billie drew Lefumez aside.

"What's the matter with him?" she asked.

Lefumez contented himself by asking a question of the Bailiff.

"What's the matter with you, Maître Sideral? You appear to be a bit——"

"Thirsty!" replied Sideral from the depths of his bed.

"You are thirsty? I should think it would be the other way."

Sideral managed to get up and walk somewhat unsteadily towards the door.

"I—I'm going to find another bottle of—I mean another glass of water—I think I've got an attack of heartburn."

He went out.

"Pardon me for not answering you a minute ago," said Lefumez, "but you can see he's in the Vincyard."

"Looks that way to me."

Lefumez glanced about the room.

"He has fallen upon the flagon of Calvados, you can see that." He held the empty bottle up. "The rascal!"

"The poor old devil. It has been rather stupid for him here night after night," sympathized Billie.

Lefumez shrugged his shoulders.

"He is happy to-night at least, Billie—I am still under the charm of this wonderful night—too short a one, alas."

"That dinner was scrumptious, served there by that rambling little brook, in the light of that sympathetic moon. You certainly had a first-rate inspiration, Henry."

Lefumez came closer.

"Billie! Adorable Billie! I will never forget our little tête-à-tête to-night. It seems to me that we've been out on a lark like two lovers quite at liberty. Truly, I have the impression of being free—without shackles!"

"Henry, you're a poet. I admit, a very nice poet!"

"*Helas!* The poetry is about to vanish, in coming back here. I feel as if I'd entered a prison; yes, a prison. There are imaginary bars between us, unfortunately, the kind that I can't bend." He took her hand. "Dearest Billie, I'd like to break all the chains to-night. That dinner in the moonlight has awakened my soul. I beg of you—I'm at the end of my self-control. I can fight no longer. What use are all these scruples, happiness is here between us. Let us take advantage."

Henry put his arm about her. Billie almost abandoned herself to his embrace. The temptation was very keen. But her determination to not let her husband get the best of her was even firmer. She slipped out of Henry's arms, only to be drawn back again.

"No, Henry, we must be strong," she pleaded.

"But I love you, Billie, and love melts all chains."

"And I love you, Henry!"

Lefumez was so excited that he let her escape his arms.

"What!—you love——"

"That is, I believe that I love you."

She was a little frightened. She was young but she knew that love was double-edged, a great happiness and a greater responsibility. He was in an agony of indecision. Billie, so adorable, was within reach. All

he had to do . . . He waved his hand in a nervous manner.

"Then, let's send Maître Sideral away. When love comes in the window repression should go out the door, and yet repression is hardly the word. Let Sideral go."

"No, no, don't tempt me. I love you, I'm sure. I love you a great deal, but I must revenge myself first. I must see that my husband, in his turn, is completely checkmated by my absolute fidelity. After that, Henry, we will see. Let me pick the opportune moment."

"You mean the moment to proclaim to the world just how we feel about each other!" He sighed. He had his face turned from her. "All right, I will try to be patient."

There was a rap at the door.

"Dammit, someone interrupting us just as we agreed to restrain ourselves. When I see Sideral, I see red. Come in!"

Amelie entered.

"Pardon, Mme la Marquise. I wanted to tell M. Lefumez that during his absence, a gentleman and lady, two of his friends, came."

"A lady and gentleman? Who?"

Amelie fished about in the pocket of her apron for the slip of paper.

"He left his name here." She handed the paper to M. Lefumez.

"M. and Mme Pelissier? Why didn't he write the rest of the name?"

"You know them?" inquired Billie indifferently.

"That's their name, M. and Mme Pelissier," Amelie informed him.

Lefumez was in a quandary. He held his hand to his head.

"Wait a minute! Pelissier? My physical culture teacher, or to be more precise, proprietor of that Swedish gymnasium. His name was Pelissier. But it's funny that he should come all the way out here with his wife to see me. I certainly don't need any treatments."

"He didn't say anything about——"

"What did he say?"

Amelie opened her eyes at the interest that Lefumez showed.

"That he would write to Monsieur," she explained.
"They were in their car."

Lefumez went on staring into empty space. Giving one the impression that he expected to pull a Pelissier out of the void like a Chinese magician does a duck out of his hat.

"Pelissier! Pelissier! Now I come to think of it there was a chap in my club named Pelissier, a fellow who has been touching me frequently this winter. Unfortunately, he has just the right touch. I wonder if he could be the one?" He spoke direct to Amelie again. There was hope in his tone. "He

didn't leave any money with you for me, did he? ”

“ Ah, no, Monsieur.”

Billie beamed protectively at Henry.

“ That was a lucky escape for you, my dear. You saved money by being out with me. If you'd been here, it would have cost you fifty louis at least. Amelie, I haven't any more need of you, you may go.”

“ Thank you, Mme la Marquise.” The maid looked at Henry with smiling eyes and left the room. For a second the Marquise bristled, she hadn't missed the smiling eyes.

“ Henry, you haven't been saying anything to Amelie? ” she asked, as unconcernedly as she could.

But Lefumez's innocence was too obvious to be expert acting, for he paid no attention to her query and went on in his ruminations about his visitors. He was somewhat embarrassed that he couldn't place his mind upon these Pelissiers.

“ Wait! I know a third chap by that name, who was my orderly at the front. I wonder if he could be the——”

Billie's rippling laughter cut him short.

“ Look out you don't strain your memory. You'll probably fish up from the bottom of your mind a dozen more Pelissiers. Come, your friend is going to write to you, so it can't be anything very serious.”

Lefumez regarded her in an absent-minded manner. “ Oh, no—it's nothing important, evidently, but——”

"Don't worry," she admonished him perfunctorily, "you're going to sleep quietly."

Woman-like, she didn't wish him to get back to his "I just can't make my love behave" mood and, to a point, she did! Life was such a mess. If you could only want things so keenly when there were no barriers, when you could help yourself! Would it be the same way then? Why was one always afraid that these desires would vanish unless you took them while the taking was good! Oh, damn everything!

"No—Billie—my dear little Billie, I won't sleep quietly," he was saying, "I'm going to worry about you. Listen, do me a favour. I'm in just the precise mood; sit down at the piano, before you go to bed, won't you? The music can get through to me and our two souls will communicate during the night on—" He was at a loss for the exact word. "On the transparent wings of our harmonies," he completed.

Billie had gone to the piano. She turned and smiled tenderly at him.

"You have my promise, my poet."

Maître Sideral entered. He actually had a glass of water in his hand. Plainly he was not himself. He tried valiantly to make a bee line to his bed. He failed ingloriously. He zigged and he zagged across the room, spilling the water splash by splash.

"I don't know," he said, stammering, "I'm not sure if you're like me about water, but when I've —excuse my hiccup, it's a family trait with the Siderals, on my mother's side!—as I was saying, when I've sipped a little Calvados, I—I've a dry tongue."

Lefumez was all sympathy. He remembered vividly several times when he walked, balked and talked like the poor bailiff. He approached Sideral.

"My poor friend, may I help you? All does not go well?"

Sideral brushed him aside.

"Thanks. I can help myself. I don't know where I got the idea of celebrating, probably that pretty maid, Amelie, started me off."

"What!" said Billie, frowning.

"Just looking at her, at a distance, not too distant, you understand, I got in a romantic mood someway." He lowered his voice to a confidential tone. "To-night—I—see lovers everywhere."

"Well, don't let us keep you up, Maître Sideral. In the morning leave your affidavit, as usual, on the table."

Sideral was busy fussing at his bed preparatory to getting into it. Billie came close to Henry and whispered.

"I'll play the other piano, in my room," she said, "you'll hear it quite clearly." Then she raised her

voice. "Good night, my friend. Good night, Maître Sideral."

Sideral lurched up from the bed. He suddenly remembered the mention of the-word affidavit.

"Yes, Mme la Marquise, in the morning my usual affidavit, I won't forget. I'll have a clearer head then, I'm very sleepy, I don't think I'll be able to hear or see anything once I fall into bed. It's the natural way to pass the night when you haven't anyone to love—dead to the world. Beg your pardon, I was thinking aloud, Madame. Good night. I am asleep already."

Lefumez's eyes were focused on Billie. In point of fact, he couldn't see anything else but the charming American, the rest was all blacked out. He escorted her to her door.

"Good night, Billie dearest," he said quite low, "don't forget, my heart has need of being lulled to sleep to-night." He kissed her hand. "Play, dearest, as you've never played before. Put your heart, my heart into it. Sweet dreams, Billie."

It seemed as if he couldn't tear himself away. Billie sighed and entered her room. Henry stood still in front of her shut door. Lost in his dreams. Sideral flopped around in his bed.

"It's true," he informed the world at large, "life is beautiful! Love is a wonderful magician! M. Lefumez, I see you surrounded by many rosy and chubby little Cupids. Like one of those engravings

by Boucher. Their ears are rosy, their little behinds are rosy, your cheeks are rosy, my little—my nose is rosy! Everything is rosy now."

As though he'd rid himself of a great load, he pulled the comforter over him, preparatory to passing into the land of Morpheus. But Lefumez was standing stock still in front of Billie's door. He was still in the grip of his emotions.

" You were saying something? "

Sideral's reply came from the depth of the bed.

" A mouthful, yes! A beautiful creature, the hostess, *hein?* Lovely lady, *hein?* "

Lefumez had actually caught his remark.

" You don't know how near the truth you are, Sideral," Lefumez observed.

" Of course—of course I do. Wasn't I crazy about my wife, Madame Sideral, before I got to know her too well. I understand your mood, it's the only one to have about a beautiful woman, at first. I understand it all. I'm very sympathetic, in spite of my professional manner."

" Oh, I suppose you do know a thing or so," admitted Lefumez absent-mindedly.

Sideral tried to raise himself up but only succeeded in flopping back on the pillow.

" Don't I? " he said. " Take your situation now, M. Lefumez, makes me think of the old saying, ' many a lip twixt the cup and the slip.' Well—the lovely cup is in there." He attempted to point at Billie's

door. "And your lips are here. There's only one door between you and the cup! My God! Can you beat that? I forgot to take my clothes off."

He managed, somehow, to get out of bed and waddle over to the screen, behind which he disappeared.

Lefumez, still before Billie's door lost in thought, paid scant attention to Sideral's actions. Had he looked he would have been sure that Sideral was undressing. Garment by garment as they were removed were hurtled over the screen. A pronounced "Ouch!" brought Henry suddenly back to earth. He heard Sideral moaning.

"My Lord, did I step on a carpet-tack? Oh, it's just a match."

When Sideral walked out from behind the screen, he presented a grotesque appearance. He had on an old-fashioned flannel night-gown, which with his night-cap, and his enormous feet tucked in his loose slippers, completed the effect. He managed, somehow, to reach the bed and disappear into its folds.

Lefumez would have broken into laughter, had not Billie, at that moment, begun to play. It was the song of Sadko and the poignant melody floated out into the old house as though it came from a great distance. Even Sideral was affected.

"That's beautiful," he murmured, "that music, there. Sounds like it came from the heavens."

"Ah—to hear that and—" Lefumez sighed.

He called to her in a low voice. "Billie, Billie!"

From his pillow Sideral encouraged the lover.

"Go on, don't work yourself up so—into that sort of a condition." Then after a few hiccups, he went on. "I've got a heart, too, only I can't find it just now, it's somewhere in the bed. Listen, M. Lefumez, to-night I want all the world to be rosy and happy."

"What were you saying?"

"M. Lefumez—I'm going to tell you something." He got up on one elbow. "There are times when you'd love to—love to do some little courtesy for your hostess, *hein?* Well I—I'm not an old bogey. Don't worry, I can be deaf, dumb and blind for the right friends. I'll sign my nineteenth affidavit in the morning like all the rest. You might consider it signed in advance."

Lefumez became interested.

"Look here, Maître Sideral, what are you driving at?"

"Go on," mumbled the drunken bailiff. "Help yourself to the occasion—a little visit—before it's too late. Opportunity only raps once at the door. To-night's an exceptional one." He paused for a moment, to get rid of a flock of hiccups. Then he listened to Billie's music, which was lovely. "That beautiful music there brings out all the young turtle doves in the Calvados. Makes them more loving than ever."

"You're drunk, you don't know what you're saying."

"I'll prove I'm a friend of yours," answered Sideral, "come closer, I will give you the keys." He reached under his pillow and pulled out two chains, two locks and two white cloth bands. "I'm going to make you master of the situation. Seal her door just before daylight—you understand—and wake me up and I'll buckle yours. Oh, I feel so wonderful, everything is so lovely. All of this will be exceptionally appropriate."

He fell back, asleep, on his pillow and began at once to snore rhythmically.

Lefumez held the keys in his hand for a moment in hesitation, then he started to turn the knob of Billie's door, when she began to play Tschaikovsky's "*Chanson Triste*." He stopped short, as though some mysterious power prevented him from opening the door.

"No!" he groaned, "not yet. After all, if I love her I must prove it—no matter how hard it is."

He turned the key in the door, put on Sideral's lock and sealed the white band across the door casing. He did all of this quickly, impulsively, as though he were afraid that he would lose courage to put temptation irrevocably behind him. He retreated with great emotion towards the table and sat down as though fascinated by that inviolate door. He picked up the paper which was lying there. It was the oath of the bailiff. He read it in a low voice:

"We, Jean Marie Celestin Auguste Sideral, Bailiff of the Civil Court of Pont-l'Eveque, at the request of the Marquise de Barestan, domiciled in her château,

we have duly locked and sealed the guest, M. Henry
Lefumez, in his room."

He continued to gaze at the paper. Tschaikovsky's
"Chanson Triste" floated out into the night. Henry's
eyes reverted to the inviolate door.

PART THREE



IT IS SERVED

I

THREE weeks on the calendar had folded themselves up and passed into discard. It was eleven o'clock in the morning. The library in the apartment of the Marquis de Barestan in Paris. Books in fancy binding alternated with the cheaper editions on the shelves in the cases. Exotic fish with bulging eyes glared out of the aquarium bowl. There was the pungent odour of tobacco. It was distinctly a man's room; restrained in colour but rich in effect.

Simone Diaz, neatly garbed in a walking suit, entered. She gave every impression of being thoroughly at home, which was the impression she intended to convey. She was followed by the Marquis's parlour-maid, who was bringing in her leather bags. Simone glanced about the room. A smile played over her face. She was in her element.

"M. le Marquis hasn't returned yet?"

"No, Madame. He went out very early this morning."

Simone began taking off her things.

"What instructions did he give you?"

"He told me that two of his friends would come

and that I'd better have them wait for him. He also said that his wife, Mme la Marquise, would return from the château, about noon, probably."

"And I?" quizzed Simone.

The maid arched her eyebrows in imaginary surprise.

"Madame?"

Simone tossed her head with a gesture too young for her. It was lost upon the maid.

"He didn't tell you that I was coming too?"

"Ah, no, Madame."

"Good!" said Simone. "He is discreet. Just the same, take those valises into the Marquis's room."

The maid was dumbfounded.

"In—the room of M. le Marquis?"

"I speak good French, you surely understand it, unless your ears are full of cotton-wool—or your head."

"Yes, Madame, no, Madame." The maid commenced getting the valises together, albeit a trifle reluctantly. She turned and looked up at Mme Diaz.

"Pardon, Madame!"

"What now?"

"Madame will pardon my mentioning it, but does Madame recall that Mme la Marquise is to return here from the country to-day at noon?"

"Naturally," said Simone haughtily.

The Marquis's maid was persistent. She didn't like Mme Diaz and her persistency was one way of showing it. The lady was entirely too dictatorial. One

would almost imagine, from her authoritative manner, that she was Mme la Marquise herself, and what a contrast between the two women! Mme la Marquise was always so thoughtful and so gentle, she was an angel, even if she were an American.

"And still you wish me to put your valises in the room of M. le Marquis?"

Simone was not very tall, but she drew herself up as if she were a giantess and glared at the maid.

"I'm giving you the order to do so now!"

The maid curtsied begrudgingly.

"Quite so, Madame," she said, taking up the valises and starting towards the door.

"Wait!" directed Simone. "I will tell you which one to open."

Louise didn't conceal her surprise.

"You wish me to open these in the Marquis's room?"

"Young woman, what's the matter with you? You understand what I'm saying; if you don't you won't be here very long."

The bell rang. Simone started for the door to the Marquis's room.

"You may answer the bell. Then bring the valises in and I'll show you." Simone left the room with the air that she deemed to be that of the Marquise. The maid crossed the library and opened the door.

II

Louise ushered Baron Cardan in.

"Well, Mademoiselle!" He looked about the room. "M. de Barestan hasn't returned from his trip yet?"

The maid smiled. Baron Cardan's manner was such a sharp contrast to that of Mme Diaz. Cardan was quite punctilious. He made it an inviolate rule always to smile at maids whether they were good looking or not—if they were young.

"Yes, Monsieur," she informed him. "He came in last night. He left instructions that M. le Baron would call here. He said he wired you *en route*. That he'd gone out just for a few minutes and for you to make yourself at home."

The Baron rubbed his hands. He fairly blinked with good humour, like a lighthouse on a foggy night.

"That's great!" he exulted. "Then I will wait."

Louise pushed one of the more comfortable chairs forward.

"M. le Baron will be seated?" she said invitingly.

"Thanks," said Cardan. "There are matches?"

"At your side." Placing the smoking-stand near him. "M. le Baron will excuse me?"

The Baron screwed his monocle in his eye and looked the maid over appraisingly.

"Go, my girl, I am quite comfortable. I hope Edmond comes back soon."

After all, this maid was nothing out of the ordinary! And she had a mole at the corner of her mouth!

"Thank you, sir."

She curtsied very gracefully and went out. Cardan leaned back in his chair, lit a fresh cigarette, puffed away contentedly and glanced about the room.

"Ah, the old boy has nice quarters, excellent taste. Always liked it here. No doubt he's glad to get back." He commented aloud. "I doubt whether he amused himself very much out in the desert. The Sahara! It is beautiful—printed on a box of dates."

The key turned in the lock and de Barestan came in. The Baron jumped up, but de Barestan was the first to speak.

"Ah, old boy! Tickled pink to see you." He wrung Cardan's hands vigorously. "How goes it?"

The Baron stood off and surveyed his friend affectionately. "But, it is of *you* one must ask that, Edmond. Let me give your Moroccan head the once over. 'Pon my word, you aren't even tanned by the sun."

"Cardan, you old rascal, it is good to hear your voice again. I am very happy to see you. I missed you." The Marquis looked cautiously about the room.

"I have many things to tell you, old man."

"You're the rascal! What solemn air you have.

You haven't shelved the old laugh, mixing with the Moroccans? The *couscous* hasn't distracted your appetite, *hein?*"

"Seriously, old boy, I have some very grave revelations to make to you. And I'm glad that I'll have the opportunity to speak to you before the return of Billie."

For the first time Cardan looked serious.

"You frighten me."

"Listen. To tell you the truth, I never went to Morocco and I—"

Cardan cut in. "What?"

"My trip out to the desert," he explained, "that was all a stratagem. Now I can confess it to you."

"You didn't go to Morocco? No trip to the desert? No searching for oil? Then why that meeting when we had to say good-bye—that evening at the Adam's Apple."

"Oh, it was part of the background of my scheme to fool all the world, which included my wife. To put over the idea that I actually was going on a trip, and secondly to—"

"So—well—at that you don't astonish me. It is quite easy to say, I knew all the while, but truthfully I did smell a mouse, or thought I did."

"I thought you would. I'm glad you're beginning to understand. At the bottom, it was very simple. Now here are the facts, I have a mistress—a very alluring mistress."

"They're always alluring, Edmond," interrupted the Baron with an immodest leer.

"Don't interrupt me. This one was—is an exception."

The Baron started to say something, but on second thought, kept his comment to himself.

"I've had a mistress for several months. Believe me, a very serious liaison. No comments from you."

"I never said a word."

"And on account of her," de Barestan continued, "I wished to divorce Billie. But, unfortunately, Billie wouldn't have it so. So, Cardan, to force her hand I invented all that stuff that you are speaking of, that happened on the evening of our meeting at the Adam's Apple."

Cardan gave a low whistle.

"Now it comes out! But why the long face? Strikes me as a very clever plot. Frankly, I think you carried it off very effectively. Did something go wrong?"

"I'm coming to that. While everyone thought that I was on the other side of the Atlas, I was right here on the scene so that I could carry out a secret investigation at the château. I thought I would have the chance to catch Henry and Billie."

The Baron arched his eyebrows.

"Clever old devil. And did you?"

"But I forgot with whom I was dealing! I was mistaken in believing that Billie would fall into the

arms of Henry so soon, so simply. Clever little American, that! She even had been so cautious as to have a bailiff sleep every night in the château, in his folding bed in the centre of the drawing-room, between the door to her room and the door to Henry's. Nothing escaped her shrewd precautions. The bailiff sealed and barred both rooms every night, so that her complete fidelity could not in any way be questioned."

Cardan's first impulse was to laugh. His second was to approve of Mme la Marquise's ingenuity. But he compromised by pulling a long face.

"No," he questioned. "A bailiff?"

"It's the truth. I was as surprised as you are now, when I saw the bailiff."

"Oh, I see, you went out there to catch them, as you were saying."

"I saw the bailiff. An awful ass. I got him drunk. He was hollow to the heels! I put the idea in his head of his letting Henry and Billie know that he was dead on the job for that one night, in the hope that they would profit by the occasion. *Mon Dieu!* I tell you, there was no bottom to the thirst of that infernal bailiff. I used a full bottle of Calvados on him, or rather, in him. Briefly, Cardan, I did everything to set the trap in order to obtain cause for my divorce and, frankly, I only wasted my time. There you are!"

"Poor old friend," he consoled, patting him on the shoulder.

"Wait a minute, I haven't finished. You haven't reached the end of your surprises."

"Heavens—is there more?"

"Much more. In the month of June, when I invited you three to that meeting at the *Pomme d'Adam*, I had thoroughly made up my mind to divorce Billie. I was simply wild about Simone."

"Simone?" queried Cardan.

"My mistress. I would have given anything to obtain my liberty. The proof of that was that I cynically pushed Lefumez towards the arms of my wife."

"Well?"

"Well, now I regret what I started." There was a hitch in his voice. "Cardan, look me over, you said I had a long face. Without doubt—I've spent three months with Simone." He lowered his voice. "And I've had enough!"

"But listen, who the devil is Simone? An actress? A star of the cinema? One of those inevitable women, that are inevitably hard to get rid of?"

"No!" he continued. "Yes. She is Simone Diaz, the divorced wife of Rizzi Diaz. You old devil, you've certainly plumped into him?"

"As a matter of fact, I haven't. All Paris talks of her! So, Edmond, you were the lover of that fascinating little brunette!"

De Barestan sighed heavily.

"Not were . . . I am yet. And what a madness

I've been through. Ah—no doubt, all Paris talks about me!"

"Yes," sympathized the Baron. "No, you understand—I always come out of the anæsthetic of my emotions the same way, a bit groggy."

"I even promised to marry her as soon as Billie consented to our divorce."

"I feel for you," lamented the Baron.

The Marquis was overcome. He remained silent.

"When such a thing happens to us, it is a tragedy," droned the Baron. "When it happens to the other fellow, well, it's a funny story. Come on, get it out of your system, Edmond. I will be your Confessor. Well, what passed between you two?"

De Barestan groaned.

"Three months of daily life! You don't have to spend a hundred nights in the company of a woman to know her from A to Z. Dear old Cardan, I had to be taught my lesson. I've learned in this brief time Simone's true character. I almost run out of adjectives when I try to picture her as she really is—authoritative, capricious, exacting, selfish, with the temper, only too frequently, of a buzz-saw. That, my dear old crony, is the fascinating little brunette, when you live with her."

"It is easily seen," observed Cardan, "that you've lived too close to the picture! I always understood she was quite amiable, quite seductive."

"Oh, of course, when I first saw her, meeting

her from time to time—you know, in our hiding-place at night. Well, she was very seductive. There was no other word, I was wild about her. I desired her affection like an idiot. I couldn't get enough of her, but the scene has changed; at present, as I live with her day by day, in plain French I'm simply disgusted with her tyrannical manner. It's like living with a tigress! Even in her best moments there are claws."

The Baron shook his head condolingly.

"Alas! There will always be women who are charming and fascinating in the candle light of a bachelor's apartment. It is in the broad daylight, when you're living together, that you discover their faults. An angel too frequently turns out to be a devil. And wings turn out to be tail!"

"And then—there's another thing."

"My God—another little thing?"

"Billie."

"Billie? I don't follow you."

"Since I found that she hasn't cheated me, even though I put the apple temptingly near her, I—well—I've——"

"Yes, I understand," Cardan drawled. "Your wife has become a saint with a halo, which draws you to her again."

De Barestan looked pathetically sad, or that's what he tried to convey by his expression.

"Yes, I confess. That is the truth."

"The fact that she didn't fall as you intended, is

sufficient to stir up a fire which had just about gone out. Ah! What fools we mortals be!"

"Fools?" questioned de Barstan sharply.

"How human we are—which is pretty much the same thing. Weather-cocks that blow with the winds, this way and that way! Puppets that respond to pulls; soap bubbles, floating here and there. We burn up the signposts to the Country of Tenderness. We wander here and we wander there. We destroy our bridges behind us. What a funny phantasmagoria; mentally we are a hodge-podge of elusive images! Love, deception, regrets and—where the hell are you?"

"And meanwhile," lamented de Barstan, "Billie is coming back here this morning with her bodyguard and I don't know what her intentions are, but I am certainly in a jam! On the other hand there is Simone, who hasn't kept her intentions hidden."

"What are they?"

"They're definite enough. I've heard them in full detail for a month now. An immediate divorce and the legalizing of our liaison! Very simple. Doesn't ask much, *hein?*"

"And you wish all that, George Dandin?"

"What's that?" asked de Barstan suddenly.

At that moment the shrill tones of a feminine voice were heard from the next room.

Cardan hadn't heard so grating a voice since his last marriage.

"My God! What's that? For the moment I thought——"

"Louise quarrelling with the cook, no doubt."

III

THE sharp, stringent voice seemed to be coming closer!

The door to the bedroom was suddenly flung open and Louise, the maid, appeared. She was speaking to someone who was out of sight.

"I'm not accustomed to being spoken to in that tone!" She slammed the door and rushed across the library with a handful of crumpled silk papers. She was so excited that she didn't notice the two men. "No," she murmured, "I've had enough!"

"Enough of what, Louise?" asked de Barestan quietly.

"Madame has cursed me enough without reason, just because of a valise that I—even a parlourmaid has feeling."

Tears welled in her eyes.

"Madame?" asked the puzzled de Barestan.

"Why, yes, you understand, M. le Marquis. The

new one! I won't stand her temper."

As though to avoid crying before the men, she rushed out of the room. De Barestan was still puzzled.

"Could Simone be in there?"

He looked towards the adjoining room.

"Dammit, your maid was quite plain when she said, 'the new one.'"

"But I don't understand. How could Simone be in my room here? I'll soon find out."

He rang.

"Astonished at her descending upon you, old boy?" asked the Baron. "She probably feels that she's at home in your place. That's what you get for loving them so."

"Wait a minute. It sounded like the cook."

The maid appeared at the door.

"Monsieur rang?"

"Louise, who is in my room? It couldn't be Mme Diaz?"

"Yes, Monsieur," Louise replied insinuatingly.

"Since when?"

"Fifteen minutes ago. She came with her bags while Monsieur was out."

De Barestan jumped as if he'd been touched with a live wire.

"What?" he shrilled, "she came with what?"

"Bags—valises—five of them! Big ones like this, heavy, filled to the top."

De Barestan looked so embarrassed it was pitiful. He tried to clear his throat.

"Ah, yes, I know—everything is all right, you may go, Louise."

Louise sighed sympathetically and faded out.

"Yes," mimicked Cardan, "everything is all right—everything is all wrong."

De Barestan couldn't get over the shock.

"In my room," he said pensively, "as if she were at home! My God—what a woman!"

Cardan suddenly felt that he was in the way. Furthermore, the scene was too reminiscent of a past chapter in his own life.

"Listen, old boy. No doubt you would like to talk to your mistress alone. It's all right with me, I'm going to smoke a cigarette outside. Yes, yes, it is better for you to be alone with this one, before the return of the other—your wife."

"Fine chance I have with that lion-tamer in here."

"Bark at her, pay her back in her own coin. A bark in time has saved many a bite."

He rushed out of the door. De Barestan hesitated a minute, then went over and opened the door of the adjoining room.

"Simone!" he called out.

Her voice almost echoed his, it came back so quickly.

"Yes, here I am."

The rustle of tissue-paper was heard as though she

were bustling about, unpacking her personal effects. She appeared in the doorway with a perfume atomizer, which she was unwrapping.

"Good morning, dearest."

She approached him affectionately and offered him her lips as she succeeded in getting the atomizer free, throwing the paper on the floor. De Barestan kissed her indifferently.

"Good morning, Simone," he said. "For a surprise, this is a good one."

Simone tried to be quite innocent of any undercurrent of his remark.

"What? Oh, a surprise. Didn't I tell you yesterday that I was coming here this morning to instal myself with you?"

De Barestan was emphatic.

"You did not!" he said. "I mean, if you did, I certainly didn't take you seriously."

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in," ordered de Barestan.

Louise appeared in the doorway. She had a large box under her arm.

"Someone just left this for Madame."

Simone smiled at her with perfect condescending humour.

"Oh, yes, Louise. I know what it is. Put it down there."

Louise chucked the box on the divan and marched out of the room.

"What is it?" asked de Barestan.

"A nightdress. It is the latest thing my dear, tango crêpe de Chine."

"A nightdress in a box as big as that?"

"Well, it's rather elaborate, they didn't want to crush it. Dammit! Edmond, the mornings are beginning to get a little cool and then your room is to the north."

One of the funniest pictures in human nature is that of a man under the sway of a woman, trying to cloud up like a rainy sky and look cats and dogs of disapproval. There was no doubt that de Barestan was embarrassed by his relations with the untamable Simone. In her presence, it was hard for him to strut his struts. There was something missing or, more to the point, there was someone present!

When Simone commented on the Marquis's bedroom facing the north, in as nonchalant a tone as possible, de Barestan bristled to the core. He tried, despite her proximity, to give an imitation of a scowling cloud about to burst all over the place.

"So!" he hissed.

To an outsider, had one been present, his hiss would have sounded akin to that of an angry goose. As a matter of fact, could one have looked into the mind of the Marquis, one would have known that that was the Marquis's own impression, that fate had handed him the rôle of an angry goose. He resumed his hissing.

"Ah! My bedroom faces north, does it?"

Simone was very wise. She knew her routine. At this precise moment it called for a predominant good humour. The more the Marquis went into the doldrums, the more she would smile and flirt.

"Listen, dearest, I thought it all over last night. The situation has become impossible. We must bring it to a close. Your wife is returning to Paris to-day. You're pretending to have returned from Morocco. If we don't profit by the occasion to break out of this stalemate, well—we'll be in just as we are now, for ever."

De Barèstan was still essaying his rôle of the vexed goose.

"I know that—but—" he sputtered.

Simone was very affectionate. She put her arms about him as though she were dealing with a petulant child.

"Let me speak," she demanded. "First, about that which concerns me. You know, my dear, that my patience is about at an end. I've been your mistress long enough to fool all the world, even your very best friends. If you love me as you said you—like I love you—Edmond, you ought to understand that you're placing me in a false position. One in which I suffer. In short, an embarrassing rôle. I'm not a little plaything of the Place Pigalle whom a man juggles with before the eyes of the world."

"Certainly not! I've never for one minute——"

"And as for your wife," Simone went on hurriedly, "you are thoroughly convinced at present—and you can't deny it—that she won't do anything to give you your liberty. You certainly were very clever with your plan to trap her, no one could have been more clever. Well, we went out to the château and from what we saw and what we heard—she didn't fall into that. On the contrary, she proved that she didn't profit by your absence to cheat you. So that's that! Well, if she won't divorce you as you like, then we must force her hand. There is no other possible way."

De Barestan tried a sarcastic tone.

"And you think that you've found a method?"

He might just as well have taken a softer tone, as far as his effect upon Simone was concerned. She was a very wise feminine and she knew when she had her man where she wanted him—or soon would.

"There's only one method left, since your plan failed," she explained patiently. "In judicial language, that is called: the maintenance of a mistress in the marriage state. In plain words that means when your wife comes in she will find me installed in the bedroom of her husband. There you are!"

"Evidently, there I am!"

"And since I am sure that Billie will not accept my presence here, she will be obliged to leave."

"Naturally!"

"Look here! You might come down a tone or

so. You might be grateful. I bring a wonderful solution of our impossible situation, which is bound to work out, and all you do to thank me is to make faces as if you'd swallowed a worm."

"Well, I don't think that I'm feeling any too——"

For the flash of a moment Simone's patience seemed to ebb.

"And this is all the pleasure that you show!"

Like Eve's sway over Adam, she was too much for the Marquis.

"Well," begrudgingly admitted de Barestan, "don't think that I'm not tickled green—only, Simone——"

"Only—you don't look it!"

Simone came closer and a scent, subtle, sweet with strange promptings, rose about the Marquis. Simone was hitting on eight cylinders and the Marquis was being swept along despite himself.

"It isn't exactly that, my dear little Simone," de Barestan heard his voice purring. "What I wanted to say was that I've asked my old friend Baron Cardan to come here this morning. I sent him a telegram as if I were on my way home from Morocco."

"And then?"

"And then, Cardan has already arrived."

"Where?"

"Here! He's outside there, smoking. And after all, Simone, it's a little embarrassing to expose our bedroom secrets in front of a third person."

Simone looked at Edmond again in that "correcting a child" manner.

"But you're joking, Edmond. On the contrary—the more we have to witness, the better it will be. Why, we're very lucky that he's here. You say he is outside, it couldn't be better! We're fortunate. I'm so glad you wired him."

"Yes," he said, in a tone that resembled considerably that of Sydney Carton about to lose his head in the guillotine.

Mme Diaz started towards the door.

De Barestan came out of his maze instantly. He rushed to her and tried to pull her back.

"Simone!" he admonished.

IV

DE BARESTAN hadn't the slightest chance to deviate Simone Diaz one whit from her evident purpose.

"Edmond, it is time to present me." She firmly pushed the Marquis away and opened the door with authority. "Ah, Baron! It is so uncomfortable smoking out there. And now, Edmond, you will present me to your dear friend."

There was nothing for Cardan to do but enter. There was nothing for de Barestan to do but present him.

"The Baron Cardan, Mme Simone Diaz," the Marquis mumbled.

Cardan, always the opportunist, measured to the occasion. He bowed delightfully.

"Madame, I am charmed."

Simone made her prettiest smile.

"So am I, Baron."

There was an awkward silence. The Baron broke it.

"Edmond," he rhapsodized, "you that I've known for twenty-five years, you that have never kept any secrets from me! Ah, Madame, he has told me of the wonderful things that he thinks of you, as one good friend to another, mind you, in strict confidence."

"Ah, well," Simone commented, "he could brag a bit for being well loved, you understand."

Cardan was not to be outdone by any woman, especially when it was the other man's woman.

"By you, Madame, it would be a distinction," he gurgled.

"Ah, you hear what the Baron is saying? You're listening, dearest?"

"Yes, I hear," admitted de Barestan.

Oddly the Baron was gazing directly at Simone, so he missed some of the fixity in the Marquis's expression. Simone beamed back at the Baron.

"Baron, Edmond would make a perfect lover if he had a little bit more willingness. We touch the bottom of our affairs and it takes all the life out of him. Why, now he has the air of being afraid—crushed! Happily I am here to galvanize him. Because I, dear Baron, I am chock full of willingness—to the tips of my very fingers."

Simone was laying it on a bit thick. Even Cardan took on a slight ironic tone.

"So I see, Madame, so I see."

"And I give you my word," Simone went on, "that this is no moment for discouragement. I take it, my dear Baron, that Edmond has fully confided in you our cherished hopes. We're going to get out of this bad rut."

"There is no rut, Madame, that one cannot get out of—none!"

She purposely misunderstood his implication.

"I knew you would understand. Edmond, we will let your dear friend, the Baron, judge us." She pointed melodramatically at the Marquis. "There's an unhappy boy, who would be obliged to sacrifice his happiness and his liberty on account of the whim of a woman whose obstinacy is incomprehensible! We two would be the victims of a shrewd and saucy young baggage who won't give her husband a chance for a divorce! Ah, no! We will turn the tables on her, no matter how clever she is, if she won't put her head in the noose, I'll drop it over for her. You'll see that

you'll thank me later, Edmond. You will say one of these days: Without Simone, without her wisdom and her spirit of decision, I should have been stuck with my silly American wife; ah, yes, lost!"

"Truthfully, Madame, the spirit of decision doesn't seem to have missed you."

But Simone was impervious to the Baron's veiled tones and insinuations.

"Look here," she said good-naturedly, "there are loads of people for whom life is one perpetual hesitation waltz. You're a man of the world, my dear Baron, you should know the ones who are successful."

Cardan decided to try a deeper dig, the moment for subtlety had passed.

"No?" he asked, "tell me!"

"Those who step squarely on the feet of others." And her tone implied that the Baron could take it any way he pleased.

She rang.

"What do you want now?" asked the Marquis.

"Louise."

"Listen, Simone," de Barestan went on. "Louise is an excellent maid. I beg of you, don't rub her the wrong way."

"Don't worry, dearest, and don't forget that the best of maids frequently should be made to feel the hand of the mistress of the house."

Before de Barestan or Cardan could comment on

this remarkable assumption, Louise, as though she'd been listening at the keyhole, popped in.

"Monsieur rang?" she asked.

"No," admitted the Marquis. "Madame rang."

"Louise," directed Mme Diaz, "you may bring in my crocodile-covered valise."

Louise automatically looked at the Marquis, who, being in a tight corner, nodded. She turned towards Simone.

"Which one, Madame? There are five!"

"Five, that's right. There's one in pig, another in cow-hide, another in Morocco, the fourth is in Russian leather and the last one in crocodile. I'm telling you this since it is very apparent that you're not very observant. Now, I want the crocodile one."

The Marquis and the Baron were silent witnesses to the little comedy that was going on in front of them.

"Oh," said Louise, "that's the one that has the little squares on the leather like those on a waffle."

Simone lost her patience.

"Like those on a waffle! My girl, if you can't tell the difference between a crocodile and a waffle at your age!"

"I am sorry, Madame, but you see I wasn't raised in the zoo."

She started towards the door.

"I don't thank you for your remarks, you understand!" said Simone acidly.

The only response from the maid was the slam of the door as she went out. Cardan started to say something, but de Barestan was quicker.

"Simone, I beg of you," he implored, "if you keep this up Louise will leave me before dinner."

"Not a word from you, you don't know how to make them obey you. It is apparent. If you did, she wouldn't be so impudent. You let me put her through her paces."

Louise appeared in the door with the valise. Strangely, her tone was quite respectful.

"Is this the one, Madame?" she asked.

"Yes, put it down there. No, not there, over here. Open it. You ought to know how to handle the locks of a valise. That's enough, I haven't any more need of you."

As Louise went out, she remarked in *sotto voce*:

"Ah! la! la!" Then her voice dropped so low that no one could miss it. "What poison!"

As far as de Barestan and Cardan were concerned, their attention was riveted on the open valise. The Marquis gazed at it as if it were the blow-off greetings of a Russian anarchist.

"What do you wish to do with that valise?" he blurted out.

"I wish to set my scene. Already your bedroom has a different look. It doesn't have so much of the bachelor effect now." She drew a framed portrait out and glanced about the room for a place to put

it. " You understand, Baron, it is necessary that his wife get the impression that I've been here for months. First my picture in plain view. That will serve as an excellent Exhibit A."

" Well, it's a charming exhibit," the Baron acknowledged, " one look at it and you know that the eyes have it unanimously! In fact the whole picture gives the idea of carrying everything!" He hurried to put a trailer on his meaning. " You understand—Madame—everything fascinating."

Simone placed the photograph on the table in the centre of the room. She looked at the Marquis for approval.

" Look, there on that table, pretty, isn't it? "

" Yes—yes—very nice."

Simone reached in the valise and brought out some embroidery which she had just started. She held it up.

" And this, Baron! A doiley for the table, with Holland embroidery." She placed it on the table.

" Here, that will look neat." She stood back and surveyed it critically. " No, it will look better on this chair. It carries the signature of a new touch." She fished a vaporizer out of the valise. " Now I'll make my presence certain."

She squirted perfume over the embroidery and an extra spurt near the photograph. At each squirt de Barestan winced as if he'd been touched with the business end of a dagger.

"Not too much, Simone." He protested. "It gives me a headache."

"Though I say it, I think that *mise-en-scène* is clever. The photograph, the doiley and the perfume! The signature of the woman who lives here."

The valise certainly contained a myriad of things, for she next pulled forth, like a conjurer, a bedspread.

"You understand, my dear Baron, it is not necessary that his wife imagine that I moved in only this morning. It is better that I stamp my personality all over the place."

She unfolded the bedspread. The Baron forgot, for a moment, the thoughts that stuck in his head.

"Superb!" he praised, "splendid, what a beautiful shade."

"Surely, you don't wish to leave bed linen here in the library?" growled the Marquis.

"On the contrary," said Simone, "that is just what is necessary. Picture for yourself, the domestic scene. I have just left your room. You are working at the table. Delighted at the interruption, you join me on the davenport, perhaps it's a little cold at first and I brought the bedspread out with me and had forgotten to take it back when it got warmer." As if to illustrate the situation, as far as her participation was concerned, she threw herself upon the divan in a "Lady-of-the-Camillas" pose. "There you are, another signature."

"The flourish" to it is charming!"

"Wait!" said Simone, "I've forgotten something." She rushed into the bedroom.

"*Voilà!*" said de Barestan with a gesture of hopelessness.

"*Voilà* is the exact word. Come, old friend, you haven't got so much to kick about. She's smart looking, your little friend. And those lips of Eros promise such tenderness!"

"But did you hear the way she talked to Louise—with those same damn lips!"

"Oh, sure, I'm not deaf! But what a woman! Such eyes, such—"

"You notice how she plants herself here in my house, makes herself completely at home."

"Yes. But what beautiful hair!"

De Barestan sighed over poignant memories.

"Ah, one has to march straight with her."

"I suppose. But what wonderful colouring—just like a lily."

"Her colouring," he snapped, "her eyes, her hair, her—what the hell! That doesn't weigh in the balance with a docile character, gentle, submissive. Now, Billie would have never—"

"Chut! Why bother about Billie? Old boy, you wished to change—"

"Well, don't rub it in. I think badly enough of myself as it is."

"You remember the old saying: 'One never picks

up discarded cards!" "Edmond, you should have never let the queen get out of your deck. Well, anyway, that will arrange itself—you understand. Be a philosopher. Remember, new motors are a little stiff at first. You know the cylinders must wear themselves down a bit."

"Alas!" mourned de Barestan. "Happy is the man who hasn't a skirt!"

No telling to what extent his frankness would have led him had not Simone hustled about into the room. She had a small package in her hand, a box and a vanity case.

"I forgot these."

"My God!" shrilled de Barestan. "What next?"

"Again," explained Simone, "my signature all over the place." She sprinkled pats of powder on the davenport, on a chair, around the fireplace. "You understand. That makes it seem more intimate. It puts the personal touch, so no one could miss it. Leave it to me, I'll think of the most minute details."

"I see, dear lady," exclaimed Cardan, "that there won't be a button on the gaiters missing, you might say."

"My motto," explained Simone, "is no half measures! If you're going to do a thing, I say, do it thoroughly."

"Thoroughly is the precise word," groaned the Marquis.

"All or nothing!" Cardan said blandly.

"Yes," echoed Simone. "And all is better than nothing." She looked up at a picture of Billie on the mantel. "While I'm thinking of it, the first Marquise de Barestan has no need to be here at all—even by remote control!" She went over and took Billie's picture down and thrust it in a drawer. "Let me see," she murmured, as she glanced about the room. "My hat—here—no, over there." She hung it up on a candelabra. "My gloves spread out carelessly, as if they'd been thrown on to that old book. And that—what on earth is it?"

She pointed to a small box, looking at de Barestan.

"Billie's cards," the Marquis told her. "She is very clever with them."

"Good!" exclaimed Simone, "couldn't be better. My rouge and my vanity case on top of it." She put them down. "Now Billie's cleverness is trumped!" She gave a final glance about the room. "Everything's all right here. I think I'll put a few more personal touches around the bedroom."

She went out.

"She thinks of everything," reflected Cardan.

There was a rap at the door. The Marquis mumbled something and Louise looked in.

"M. Merignol has arrived, M. le Marquis," she told him.

"Show him in."

Cardan rubbed his hands joyfully.

"Ah! Good old Merignol, he will be surprised. You have written him of your return?"

"Yes, I wired him at the same time I telegraphed you."

Simone appeared in the doorway.

"Didn't I hear a bell or a knock at the door? Who is it? Not the Marquise?"

"No. A friend who has come to see me."

"Oh; for a moment I thought it was your wife! Who is it?"

"Merignol."

Simone looked at the Marquis with more than usual interest.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "not Victor Merignol?"

De Barestan nodded.

"He's a fine mug, he is!"

"Simone!" cautioned de Barestan. "I will not permit you to——"

"Well, let it go, it's all the same to me. But listen, my dear boy, if you don't want a shadow to come between us, you will do me the pleasure of not receiving that mug, Merignol, here."

"Mug is the wrong word. Madame, you don't know him—such a charming fellow, Merignol," Cardan protested.

"Oh—yes!" She turned to the Marquis. "My dear, I know what I'm talking about. You understand, Edmond? While you're giving the quick exit to this—this friend, I'm going to put myself at ease.

I don't care to see him. Send for me when your wife arrives. That's all that interests me. Except you, darling. Come, Papa kiss nicely?"

It would be a gross exaggeration to describe de Barestan's kiss as a nice one. It seemed more of a peck.

"Don't be so rough in front of the Baron, Edmond."

"No, my dear," he muttered.

"Now listen, darling, don't be silly and don't worry yourself about anything and get rid of that big moose, Merignol."

She walked majestically out of the room.

"What was that she told you?" asked Cardan.

"Not to worry about anything."

"No, after that. What did she call you, or was it Merignol?"

"Moose was the word. She was describing Victor."

Cardan whistled softly.

"So! Well, where there's a moose there's mice! I smell one. I wonder if——"

De Barestan stretched his hands to the Heavens.

"Don't allow your imagination to get the best of you, Cardan! At any rate, I can't receive my old friend any more. It is unheard of!"

V

Louise opened the door. Merignol bounced in. He was in the flush of good humour.

"Good morning! Ah, Edmond! Noble traveller, the top o' the morning to you. Well, well. Was it lovely there in Morocco? Did you visit the royal harem?"

Merignol plunged on.

"Did you see any other ruins?" he jollied. Despite his girth he gave an imitation of *la danse du ventre*, in fact he added several new and original wiggles. He suddenly noticed Cardan. "Ah! my dear Baron, it goes?"

"My God, Merignol! If you would charge a stiff price and hire a hall, I think you could make good money imitating a washboard with your stomach."

De Barestan reached over and shook Merignol's hand.

"My old friend. How is everything with you?"

"Not so bad, not so good, perfectly normal, thanks. No complaint. Tell me of your adventures, you must have killed some lions. I can take it for granted that you made a killing amongst the dears in the harems. I suppose you ate a *filet mignon* cut from a camel?"

De Barestan made a wearied gesture. Cardan looked at the Marquis understandingly.

"Don't worry, Edmond, I'm going to put Merignol wise to everything about you. My dear old cut-up!" he said, turning to Merignol, "learn the truth all in one stretch. De Barestan never went to Morocco!"

Merignol's eyes almost popped out.

"What!" he demanded.

"Edmond has a mistress——"

"Oh, I thought it was something serious."

"It is! She expects him to divorce Billie so he can marry her, and she's got hold of him like a turtle."

Merignol addressed his remark to the Marquis.

"Seriously, you're going to marry your mistress? True, one promises a great many things before the helping!"

Cardan answered for de Barestan.

"Well, you can put it that she is the one who absolutely demands marriage. She's every exception to prove the rule! You don't know her, Merignol. When she puts her foot down—she gains a yard!"

De Barestan picked up Simone's portrait.

"Here's her picture," he said sadly.

Merignol glanced at it perfunctorily; and then with keen interest.

"Ah!" He held the picture closer and looked at it from all angles. "Ah! This is too, funny!" chuckled Merignol.

But de Barestan was in no laughing mood.

"What is it that's so funny?"

Merignol came closer with the portrait in his hand. He tried to speak, but the words came out like little puffs from a machine-gun.

"Oh, oh, oh, ah, ah! ah!"

He seemed to be having trouble with his breath. His face reddened up until it resembled a young beet.

"Well, don't choke to death. Come, what's the matter with you?"

"Confess, Merignol, you know her?" said the Baron.

By this time Merignol was holding his sides, he was laughing so vigorously.

"He asks if I know her! Ha! ha! Funny old world! Small world at that. You don't know who's 'oo you're going to plump into next." He looked at 'de Barestan as a jolly old Bishop might look at a young preacher about to take the orders. "So, my boy!" he cajoled, "you are one of us, *hein?* *Et tu,* Brute!"

De Barestan hopped about him in aggravation.

"Are you speaking to me?" He appealed to the Baron. "And why does he say *et tu*, Brute?"

Merignol, perhaps for the first time, noted how seriously the Marquis was taking his remarks. He stopped laughing and shrugged his fat shoulders.

"Oh, nothing, nothing! After all, it's none of my affair; I was just spoofing. I'm sometimes taken that way suddenly."

De Barestan was not to be thwarted.

"Listen, Merignol, you're one of my oldest friends, you can't put me off that way. You should tell me what you know. Simone acted queerly a moment ago at the mention of your name, now I come to think of it."

"Women are that way," philosophized Merignol. "I should not talk too much and venture too far into gossip either with you or with her, oh, no, not I."

"As one good friend to another," entreated the Baron.

"But, I beg of you, Merignol," entreated the Marquis.

Merignol shook his head

"Edmond, be reasonable, I have always noticed that people who meddle in the sentimental affairs of others find themselves one day the goose of the plot."

"It is I, your loyal friend, who implores you to tell me what you know," pleaded de Barestan.

"Well, if you put it that way, you have me," said Merignol resignedly. "You witness, Cardan, that I don't do this willingly. Very good, as pal to pal, I will tell you, Edmond, simply that this forced marriage stunt—Madame Diaz has already played it on me."

"Seriously?" Even Cardan was astonished at this. Merignol continued.

"Certainly, sometime before her marriage with the multi-rich Rizzi Diaz. She was a young girl then. I mean to convey, a very sharp young girl. Without mincing words, she trapped me in a sentimental

ambuscade, which either in England or America would have resulted no doubt in what they call a shotgun marriage. I only pulled myself out with a handsome present. At any rate, the intention was quite clear, and I had a devil's own time deterring her from her design. Now, Edmond, you will understand why I facetiously welcomed you as 'one of us.' "

"Lord!" he exclaimed, "there were others?"

"Perhaps I drew on my imagination there," hedged Merignol.

"I understand," said de Barestan thoughtfully. He looked as if he'd just heard Gabriel's cornet solo.

"I'm awfully sorry," condoned Merignol, "but you forced me to tell my little story. After all it is best that it came out. Profit from it if you can. But if you do marry, I think it would be wiser that I go!"

De Barestan patted Merignol.

"Thank you for your confidence. I made a mistake, I should have seen you sooner. Then you might have been able to——"

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in."

"M. Henry Lefumez asks if M. le Baron will receive him," said Louise, standing in the doorway.

"Henry!" said Cardan excitedly.

"Henry!" said Merignol happily.

*Henry! " said de Barestan hopefully. " Tell him
to come in. weared.
Louise disappeared.*

VI

CARDAN laughed in relief.

"The bodyguard is at our walls! News from the front!"

"That's great!" puffed Merignol, who was delighted that the subject of the conversation had veered.
"I shall be proud to see him."

Cardan looked over at the Marquis for an expression.

"What have you got, old boy? What is the matter?"

"I've——" said de Barestan in a sad tone, "well, I've got Merignol's story on my heart. She concealed everything from me!"

"So it is done by the wisest of them!" summed up the Baron.

"I'm sorry," sympathized Merignol.

Lefumez burst in without formality. He was ceremoniously dressed. He bore a cane and white gloves.

"Edmond!" he cried, "it is I!"

"Good morning, Henry!"

"Hello, Henry!"

"Glad to see you, Henry!"

Lefumez was quite formal in his manner. He addressed himself to the Marquis.

"Edmond, once in Paris, my first visit is to

you. Or, to be more precise, I went to change my clothes before rendering to you an account of my mission."

Merignol looked at him admiringly.

"Henry can think of the most appropriate costumes. You're a sight for sore eyes."

Lefumez didn't know whether to take Merignol seriously or in jest.

"What! I am unbuttoned somewhere?"

"Not a button out of place. You are resplendent, you are like Milord Astor's pet gee-gee," said Cardan.

"And Billie?" asked de Barestan with a hitch in his voice. "Put your cane in the corner and take off your gloves. You seem affected."

Lefumez flushed and hesitated.

"I preceded Billie," he explained, "I returned with the car and all the baggage. She preferred to take the train."

The Marquis tried to appear disinterested.

"How is she?" he asked in the manner of a normal husband.

"Oh, all right," answered Lefumez, "and yet, all right isn't quite the word. You might say, she's getting along well."

"And then?" asked Merignol.

"What?" Lefumez said.

"Billie is coming here?" asked de Barestan.

"Yes, her train arrives at eleven-forty-seven at the Saint-Lazare Station."

"And she told you that she would come directly here?" de Barestan continued.

"That's what she said."

The Baron chipped in a word. "And all this sojourn in the country?"

"Yes, you haven't told us anything," complained Merignol.

The Baron chuckled. "When the dice favoured you last June, Henry, it was understood that you were to make a report about your mission." The Baron suddenly became serious. "Well, what the devil, you haven't said a word yet."

"I've a lot to say," Lefumez informed them gravely.

De Barestan was impatient. "Say it!"

"We're all ears," commented Merignol.

"No!" said Lefumez firmly.

"What do you mean, no?" Merignol bristled.

"I mean what I have to say is for Edmond's ears alone."

"Ah! That isn't nice."

Cardan, by his expression, shared the disappointment.

"That's true, it isn't. Our mouths are fairly watering!"

"I assure you my conscience wouldn't permit me—" continued Lefumez.

De Barestan looked at Merignol and the Baron.

"Perhaps you boys had better leave me alone with him for a moment."

"Oh, surely," said Merignol. "Just the same, Lefumez, we came back to get the 'to be continued' stuff and now we're told to go out and cool our heels and guess at the tag of the plot! Very unsporting!"

"Extremely disappointing," said the Baron, hooking his arm in Merignol's as they walked out.

Alone with de Barestan, who wearily sat down, Lefumez approached him gravely. He stood in front of him, almost as if they were about to fence. He looked the Marquis over quizzically and suddenly, very much moved, he dramatically extended his two hands.

"Edmond!" he exclaimed.

De Barestan was so astonished that he stood up.

"What's the matter with you?"

There was a dramatic pause. Then in a choked voice, Lefumez spoke.

"Edmond—I'm afraid I'm going to astonish you—no, disappoint you."

The Marquis was so astonished he sat down. "What?" he shrilled.

Lefumez raced on in his dramatic explanation.

"Yes. Deep down within me, I'm very sensitive. Outwardly, I am—I am cold, like the Far North. But underneath the ice there is a warm heart. I am hot-cold—no—cold-hot!" Impulsively he reached over and took de Barestan's hands. "Edmond, I am choked, my emotion almost overthrows me. Dear old friend, I don't know how to thank you enough."

The Marquis was still astounded, but he remained in his chair.

"To thank me?"

"Yes. Dear old comrade, you have a right to all my gratitude!"

By this time the Marquis's eyes resembled those of a goggle-eyed sunfish.

"But, listen, what in the devil are you trying to say? I don't follow you at all."

"It is the other way about—I follow you. What am I trying to say? Well, it's a little hard to explain in a word or so. It's like this, you see—I should give you a smack on the shoulder of real gratitude—I should give you the fraternal accolade of the Gauls after the battle is won! My soul overflows, my heart is about to burst, Edmond! Happiness oozes out of every pore. My good fortune hangs about my head like a halo! I am sparkling with sheer delight."

By this time the Marquis was beginning to show irritation.

"Look here, Henry, this is no theatre, and I'm no audience. I'll admit you're a good actor when you're spouting that sort of stuff, but won't you speak in plain language to me? Come down off the stage and use words that I can understand. For the love of the League of Nations, explain yourself."

"It is true, I am dramatic, I do put the cart before the horse. It's the way I'm built. I will try to come down to earth, so you will understand. Edmond,

listen, on the twenty-seventh of last June, at eleven in the evening, you chose me to seduce your wife. I accepted that delicate task. Without hesitation, you will admit that. Without a murmur. I left with Billie for your château of Sargueville, thoroughly determined to carry out my duty. We are now at the second of October. That makes ninety-seven days that have passed, or to be more exact, ninety-seven days, eleven hours and forty-five minutes."

The Marquis blew up.

"What're you trying to impersonate now, a clock?"

"Don't interrupt. I'm serious. During that lapse of time, I have learned to know and appreciate Billie. Let me talk, Edmond, don't stop me again. At your château, I forced myself into her daily intimacy."

"What?" barked de Barestan.

"Like a brother, you understand," Lefumez rushed to explain. "Like a big brother."

"Yes," said de Barestan, "but I still don't understand—"

Lefumez smiled upon him.

"You don't know your good luck yet! You don't know how well I've carried out—" He suddenly sidetracked his train of thought. "You will never know what enchantment there was out there for me. Ah, Billie is an adorable creature!"

"I know it," admitted de Barestan sadly.

"Adorable is not the fitting epithet. Ideal is better. There is no word in our language to fit her.

You cannot imagine what a treasure of beautiful traits are in that marvellous little woman."

All of this was pouring salt into de Barestan's wounds.

"Shut up, Henry," he implored.

"No. I will not! You do not know her as I do. You can't stop me from crying her virtues to the four winds of Heaven. I was her pal, all Summer. I fell under the charm of her conversation. I appreciated, hour by hour, the delicate tenderness and the firm integrity of her beautiful soul. Because, you understand, we never left each other for a moment. In the daytime, it was a walk in the park or intimate chats along lovely country roads, under the Normandy apple trees! At night we played cards, we had music, and we went to bed, each one to our own room. Very wisely, very sanely! Every night, because I promised myself, Edmond, because I had foresworn to do the right thing. I didn't act like a bounder any more when I was near her, I didn't try to take advantage of her, I tried to understand her. I was ashamed for her and ashamed for myself, too. You may laugh if you wish, but I, Henry Lefumez, became quite chaste. Curse me if you wish, choke me, injure me, slap me in the face, box my ears. You could even step on my pet corn, but somehow I could not carry out your wishes."

Lefumez had been so wrapped up in the sentiment of his words, that he had failed to notice the effect of

them upon the Marquis. He suddenly noticed him now. De Barestan's expression closely resembled that of a drowning man coming up for the third and last time. Lefumez's conscience back-fired on him.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked. "Are you ill? Your trip was too much for you?"

"No—nothing—nothing!"

"Edmond, do you want me to tell you quite roughly, quite brutally, what I really think?"

"What? You frighten me!"

"Your wife is an angel."

De Barestan seemed to shrivel up like a mummy.

"Yes," he said, faintly.

"She has all the virtues of a Frenchwoman and all the charm of an American girl."

"Yes—yes."

"She is beautiful and she is good!" eulogized Lefumez.

"Yes—yes—yes—" De Barestan was using "yeses" as extravagantly as a successful scenario writer out in Hollywood.

"She hasn't ~~a~~ single fault."

De Barestan looked as crushed as an accordion opera hat.

"Yes—I mean no—~~nothing!~~"

Lefumez glared at him.

"Who's saying this? Let me finish. Listen to me instead of saying yes, yes, no, no, ~~la~~, like a poll-parrot. Perhaps you aren't interested."

"I am," acknowledged the Marquis in a hollow voice.

"Well, I'm telling you," continued Lefumez, looking to the skies for confirmation of his ardour. "The life that I lived at your château was paradise itself."

De Barestan groaned. For the moment he forgot Merignol's story. Somehow, Henry's rhapsodizing of Billie got on his nerves. Through his mind raced the damnable fact that Henry was much younger than he was, younger and more ardent. It was all right to be middle-aged but it was a rotten trick to have Life remind you of it by obvious comparison.

What a fool he'd been—to choose Henry! The words fairly choked him.

"And I picked you out as a loyal friend—trusted you to deceive me——"

But Lefumez never heard de Barestan's muttered protest.

"Billie, on the other hand, told me frankly about you being goofy over another woman—your mistress—and your red-hot desire to divorce Billie at any price."

"And then what?" asked de Barestan in chilled tone.

This time, Lefumez was astonished.

"And then what?" he repeated. "Since the moment has come; let me tell it to you, before Billie arrives."

He was so overcome he sat down.

"What the devil do you mean?" shrilled de Barestan. The Marquis was so emotionally excited he stood up.

Lefumez, looking as if he were about to faint, glanced up at the Marquis.

"My old friend, Edmond—I have the honour to ask you for the hand of your wife!"

De Barestan straightened up as though he were Goliath and Lefumez, David.

"My God—that! That's the last straw! I'd rather see her married to the devil than let you have her!"

Lefumez wasn't abashed.

"It throws you off your pins, I understand. But listen, just because you got tired of your wife, that's no reason why you should discourage others. What the hell, don't be a dog in the manger."

He took a close look at the Marquis's face.

"What, you're still sore. I never saw such a man. You're so unfair. I love Billie, she loves me. You don't believe it? My good friend, that adorable creature, actually cares for me. Therefore, we've decided to fulfill your wishes and get married, which will give you what you want, your divorce. Instead of looking like a blinking lion——"

Here the Marquis tried to live up to the accusation. He tried to look like a blinking lion and came near succeeding. But Henry ploughed on.

"Looking like a silly lion with a thorn in his paw

—instead you should heartily congratulate me. Billie consents finally to give you your liberty, the divorce that you plotted to get at any cost. Wake up, old man, come out of your manger; it's wonderful news that I'm bringing you, *hein?* But you don't seem to be tickled to death. Tickled to death is not the precise word—you look as if you were about to blow up all over the place."

Which de Barestan proceeded to do. He was so mad he danced as if he were on hot coals.

"Idiot!" he cried out.

"Idiot? You mean me?"

"Imbecile!"

"Referring to me?"

"Do you think I wish to listen to your eulogies of my wife?"

Lefumez almost fell out of his chair.

"I beg your pardon!" He jumped up and backed away before the furious de Barestan.

"You damn fool," cursed the Marquis, "you think I want to listen to you sing on all notes the merits of a woman that I appreciated long before you did?"

"But I don't understand—I——"

"A woman that I understand better than you ever could."

"Why, I never said——"

"You infernal little ass!" bellowed de Barestan, "get the hell out of here! I know quite well that Billie has a heart of gold and that she is loyalty itself."

" If you knew that, why in the devil did you wish to get rid of her under any circumstances? "

" Because—because there are such women whom one only gives full value to after one has lost them." Suddenly the Marquis realized that he was explaining himself. " Why should I explain to you! "

Now that Lefumez began to understand, his manner changed, his fear disappeared.

" This is delicious! " he commented with a broad grin. " You fix it all up so that Billie and I will fall into each other's laps and when we do, you have a duck-fit! You'll pardon me for laughing at you, you poor old devil, ha, ha, ha. This is funny as hell! "

De Barestan tried to imitate Henry's laugh in derision. It was a failure as far as the effect was concerned. One wasn't certain whether it was a laugh or a choking fit.

" Yes—funny as hell! "

" That isn't putting it strongly enough! That isn't the precise word, no. You are comical, you know."

De Barestan shook his fist in Lefumcz's face.

" I am comical? "

" You're so inconsistent that I can't help but laugh at you."

" So I'm a clown, am I? Well, young man, don't forget that Billie's still my wife. You have asked for her hand in marriage, well, you can't have her and you'll cease your approaches towards her, you understand? If I catch you having anything to do with her

after to-day I'll—I'll skin you alive! This comedy has gone on long enough. You can't make an ass of me."

"Perhaps I'm a trifle late."

"And as for Billie, when she comes in I'll tell her—"

"Tell her what?"

The Marquis wouldn't give him that consolation, and, incidentally, he didn't know what to tell her, anyway.

"I'll tell her what I'm going to tell her!"

"You've made your bed, my dear boy, and Billie's not going to lie in it."

"What do you mean?"

"Billie and I, we understand each other so well that with or without your permission"—here Lefumez snapped his fingers in front of de Barestan—"we leave for Italy to-morrow. Meantime, you can proceed to get your divorce. I count upon you."

"Oh, yes!" said de Barestan ironically. "Well, my little friend, as far as the divorce goes, that is off."

"Off? Are you really serious or just sore? Is that fact or wounded vanity? Do I understand that you actually don't wish for a divorce at present?"

"It means that I'm going to keep my wife."

"And your little friend, your mistress? That liaison which you wished to legalize by obliging Billie to give you your liberty?"

"Well, since you're so anxious for the truth, you

shall have it! My liaison, I've had enough of it. A little bit more than enough. Marry my mistress after —after what I know now, never!"

Lefumez lost some of his assurance.

"Why, I understood she was a charming girl. See here, Edmond, I question if you know at this precise moment whom you really do want."

"I tell you," raved de Barestan, more to himself than to Henry, "I've had enough of her and her tantrums! A tyrant, yes! A charming woman who has already installed herself here in my house, like an enemy in a conquered country. A charming woman, yes, who leads me around already by the end of my snout—like some ox with a ring in his nose." The Marquis was talking faster and faster and at the top of his voice. "A woman who in six months would have changed me completely about! And it is for that reason"—he paused to point to the door of his bedroom—"and it for the reason of that—that I'm going to lose an exquisite wife, whom I didn't have sense enough to appreciate. It is for that female bull-in-the-china-closet in there! That female camel who breaks the last straw, that I have to give up——"

It was indeed the psychological moment for Simone to appear. And she didn't disappoint. She opened the bedroom door and gazed at the two men pleasantly as though she hadn't overheard a single word of her lord and master's indictment. She had changed her dress and was now displayed in gorgeous black lace .

sleeping pyjamas. She was giving her nails a final touch of silver polish.

"Darling!" she said, looking roguishly at de Barestan.

VII

HENRY LEFUMEZ was all eyes. Even if he was in love, he was young and impressionable. He could risk a glance at the alluring creature before him; he risked several. Simone continued in dulcet tones:

"You were speaking just now, Edmond dear, of—"

Mme Diaz was all pretty confusion; she suddenly noticed Lefumez.

"Oh, I thought you were alone, dearest. Present your friend."

"In that get-up!" said de Barestan furiously.

"Why, of course. Pyjamas of this sort are all the rage, and among old friends—"

"Mme Simone Diaz," said de Barestan sarcastically, "let me present Henry Lefumez."

Lefumez bowed elaborately.

"Enchanted, Madame! I've heard my old friend, Edmond, rave so much about you."

"Does he?" asked Simone.

Lefumez rushed to assure her.

"Certainly, Madame. Why, he's just been talking very keenly about you."

Simone said something quickly. It sounded like "Oh, yeah?" She continued sweetly:

"I suppose I shouldn't be astonished at that, for Edmond is a splendid lover. You must excuse my pyjamas. I make myself quite at home here, because I believe, M. Lefumez, that you understand our relations."

"Mon Dieul Madame! Of course I knew—er—I had a vague idea."

"Yes, he knows all," admitted de Barestan reluctantly.

"That's great!" purred Simone like a nice kitten. "Then Edmond hasn't kept from you his desire to get out of an unhappy marriage."

"Listen, Simone," exploded de Barestan, "don't let's speak of that delicate situation at this moment, I beg of you. Some other time when—"

"Why not now, dearest? Your friend Lefumez's curiosity is already aroused. These little mysterious secrets are no longer the proper thing. The right way to get rid of family skeletons is to open the closet door. Let us put our cards on the table. Unburden yourself, M. Lefumez, tell us the truth."

"Unburden myself about what, Madame?" asked the perplexed Lefumez.

"Come, come, just between us, of course, you're in love."

"With whom?" asked Lefumez.

"Edmond's wife!"

"Yes, I am, Madame."

"Perfect . . . fine!"

"Simone, you embarrass us. Will you, yes or no, leave this subject alone?"

Simone smiled at the Marquis. Apparently she was in the most patient humour.

"Why should I, dearest?" she asked him. "We have the chance to make a new ally in the presence of your sympathetic and charming friend——"

"Oh, Madame," said the confused Lefumez.

Simone went on, all sails to the winds, full speed ahead.

"It's the truth, I don't doubt that the Marquise Billie finds you very sympathetic and extremely charming!" She turned to de Barestan. "Why is it that men shy at the truth about their emotions, Edmond? It is quite natural that I confess ours to your friend here because you and I are very much obliged to him now that he's made it possible for you to remove the stone about your neck."

"Oh, my God!" groaned de Barestan, "it's getting worse and worse."

Simone seemed surprised at this.

"Look here, M. Lefumez," she asked Henry, "the Marquise de Barestan, she is not still resolute in refusing to grant a divorce?"

"No, Madame," replied Lefumez.

"I thought so." Then she smiled again upon Henry. "You have conquered her scruples?"

"Yes, Madame."

"And there's danger that she'll change her mind? Else, why should Edmond act so——"

De Barestan addressed his groans to the Heavens.

"Oh—oh—oh!"

Neither Lefumez nor Simone paid the slightest attention to him. They were fast beginning to understand each other.

"There is no danger at all, Madame, of the Marquise changing her present intentions. We love each other. We have resolved to live our lives together. I have just spoken of it to Edmond."

Simone was so delighted that she looked as if she were about to kiss Henry.

"Oh, listen, M. Lefumez," she caroled, "you are a wonderful friend! Edmond will never be able to thank you enough for your loyalty! I think you're adorable. Let me embrace you." Which she proceeded to do *con mucho gusto*.

De Barestan was again dancing up and down in exasperation. No one paid the slightest attention to him.

"You are my saviour! Truly, Henry, you saved us. Edmond will never forget you. I hope I may prove my gratitude to you some day."

Before Lefumez could sidestep her, she rushed to him again and folded him in her arms.

"Thanks, Madame, thanks—I am overcome," gasped Lefumez. "Thanks a lot. No, I'm not overcome, I am searching for the word—touched! Yes, I am proudly, no, profoundly—extremely touched. Because, after all, I haven't done anything to merit your charming praise."

"Well, you're certainly a very faithful friend of Edmond's. And I don't mind confessing that if I weren't so crazy about de Barestan I'd take a good second look at you, Henry. No wonder Billie fell head over heels for you." Suddenly she thought of de Barestan. Something was wrong, he hadn't said anything disagreeable for several minutes. "Edmond," she called to him. "You're standing there like a deer in his cage in the zoo."

De Barestan called upon the Heavens to witness his calm at this supreme moment.

"In lace pyjamas in my library!" he exploded.

"Well, don't have a fit just yet," warned Simone. "You understand that this costume is all a part of the *mise-en-scène*." She turned to Lefumez. "Again, M. Lefumez, I am very happy that we understand each other thoroughly in this little family affair. This divorce that we all desire, the Marquise, Edmond, you and I, is now only a question of a few hours."

The Marquis was at the end of his self-control, he could remain no longer. As he made for the door he was muttering to himself.

"You jackass! You dampool! You've made a bloomer this time!"

He slammed the door behind him.

Lefumez gazed sympathetically towards the door.

"Poor old Edmond, he never does know when he's lucky."

"Don't pay any attention to him, my dear. I've never seen anyone else quite so blah! Quite so unable to definitely make up his mind. Here we are, for three months or so he's been crying on my shoulder every day that he wished to separate from his wife, and when everything is all set and we approach success he hesitates, he evades, he tries to dodge the issue."

"He's a very lucky chap, to have a charming companion like you, Madame. Still his attitude worries me a great deal."

Simone patted Henry's hand.

"I am always here, so don't worry. Go find him for me. I know how to handle him. I'll fix him."

"I believe you do—know how to handle him."

"I wasn't born last night."

"I'll go for him immediately. I'll tell him."

"Tell him I want to speak to him immediately."

"I'll tell him—providing he doesn't give me my walking papers."

Hesitatingly Lefumez went out. As soon as Simone was alone in the library, she fussed all the pillows up on the divan and then plumped herself down in the centre as near an imitative appearance, as she could

imagine, of Cleopatra reclining on her royal barge on the Nile. To add a personal note, she lit a cigarette.

"Poor Edmond!" she mused aloud. "If I didn't have him well in hand!"

VIII

THE maid opened the door and ushered Mme la Marquise in. The lights in the room had been lowered a trifle and neither one of them noticed Simone reclining on the sofa, her legs spread out, her hands cushioning her head. Quietly puffing on her long cigarette. Billie was attractively dressed in a neat travelling-suit. She waved the maid back in the hall as she spoke.

"I haven't need for you now, Louise. Go tell the old gentleman who accompanied me to wait for me in my parlour. I'll come back to him in a few minutes, that's all." She shut the door and suddenly noticed Simone in her familiar possession of the sofa. "Pardon, Madame," said Billie, quite surprised, "but is the Marquis de Barestan here?"

Simone continued to carry out the effect of Cleopatra. She turned leisurely, looked the Marquise over

from head to foot and then, taking her good time, she arose.

" You must be the Marquise de Barestan. You are so lovely."

" I am the Marquise. Whom have I the honour of addressing? "

" Simone Diaz! "

This time it was Billie who did the sizing up. She took in Simone from the tip of her pretty slipper to the topmost curl of her saucy head.

" Ah—very well—charmed to meet you, Mme Diaz."

Simone was quite at ease. She smiled at Billie's greeting.

Among clever women a smile frequently is the opening wedge to a tacit understanding. A kiss? Never! Billie too became quite amiable.

" Oh—then we two can understand each other much better."

" I see that we were made to understand each other."

" I don't doubt it. Permit me to ask you if you had a pleasant trip in Africa—with my husband? "

" The Marquis never went to Africa," Simone informed her.

Billie was not going to let Mme Diaz outdo her in smart acting. At this revelation, which did surprise her, quite keenly, she didn't show the slightest expression of concern.

" No? Better and better."

The two women were beginning to understand each other thoroughly.

"Edmond," Simone went on in explanation, "like the Englishman in the story, remained near the menagerie in the hope that the lion would eat up his tamer."

"The menagerie is the château, the trainer is myself and the lion, M. Lefumez?" transposed Billie.

"Quite so. It is a pleasure to explain to a person like you; one doesn't have to draw any diagrams."

Billie could by-play too.

"You knew what you wanted, Madame Diaz, and now you have him! My husband has attained the result that he wished for, but not in the manner he planned. The lion didn't devour me—however, I have returned here to offer to my husband the means of breaking a marriage which displeases——" Billie almost hesitated before she added the last word, "him."

Simone was graciousness itself.

"I lay before you a thousand thanks, dear Marquise. And not to be outdone in thoughtfulness, I preceded you here so that I might install myself in marital fashion, in order to put an end to this little game."

Billie impulsively extended her hand.

"Thanks, Mme Diaz, you are a peach! No wonder my husband's crazy about you."

" I always say that if you let the women settle things among themselves, without the men interfering, well, everything comes out splendidly."

" It is a pity that we didn't get together sooner, you and I."

" In my pyjamas?" asked Simone innocently.

" Damn!" said Billie admiringly. " Gilding the lily!"

" If you continue, Marquise, you're going to actually make me blush!"

Billie looked about the room. She was in the jolliest of tempers.

" What a comedy this has been!" she exclaimed. " Life is a funny kettle of fish. Here it is six months that I've had you at the back of my mind without actually knowing you. Now, I find you charming and well worth knowing."

" And I, dear Marquise," purred Simone, as one nice pussy-cat to another, " I wish you much happiness with the delightful M. Lefumez."

For the moment, Billie forgot she was talking to another woman; she spoke truthfully.

" I love him!"

" I congratulate you, because I sense that he is simply wild about you. You are very fortunate." Then Simone added as a womanly afterthought:

" And so is he, extremely lucky!"

All of the preliminary compliments having been exhausted, Billie returned to common sense.

"Listen, Mme Diaz, have you been at home here for some time?"

"Just between the two of us, my dear, only since three quarters of an hour!"

Billie, admiringly:

"No!" She looked about the room searchingly; she didn't miss a single signature. She couldn't have, unless she'd been blind, which she decidedly was not.

"My compliments, Mme Diaz. You've certainly made your setting authentic. A *mise-en-scène* like this would convince even two Philadelphia lawyers!"

"I suppose I ought to organize a personal agency to dress up scenes for flagrant violations of the marriage code."

Billie sat down near her on the divan.

"Oh, what is this powder?"

"What's the matter?" asked Simone nervously.

Billie sniffed. "Poudre Fleur de Nuit? But that isn't the kind I use."

Simone, relieved, began laughing naturally.

"No, I changed it just a minute ago."

"Oh," said Billie insinuatingly, "did I interrupt a little love scene here on the sofa?"

"Ah, give me credit for better management than that," parried Simone. "It was only that I was thinking of the setting."

IX

No telling how truthful Billie and Simone might have become, had not the Marquis de Barestan opened the bedroom door and been struck dumb on the threshold at the sight of the two women chatting away most amiably. Billie looked up as though his entrance was the most natural thing in the world.

"Good morning, Marquis."

"Well, Edmond?"

"You look as if you'd suddenly changed into a pillar of salt."

"Perhaps, my dear, it is the salt of the situation which hasn't taken place."

"Look here, Edmond," Billie continued, "my presence hasn't struck you dumb?"

Simone got up.

"Listen, dear Marquise, I leave you with your husband. It is natural, you two have several personal matters to thrash out, surely, I understand that."

"Thanks," said Billie graciously, "it won't take long. I will give him back to you in a few minutes, in an excellent state of preservation."

Simone smiled at both of them and went into the bedroom.

"I've had enough!" de Barestan cried out. He

clenched his hands as though he were choking an imaginary person to death. "I've had more than enough." He raced up and down the room in front of Billie, who sat on the sofa and watched him placidly.

"Edmond," she observed, "what is the matter with you? Have you gone screwy?"

"Billie!" he implored desperately, "you see before you the most unhappy man in all the world! I have made the greatest howler of my life and I could chop my head off the way I hate myself. What an ass, what an idiot—what a blind fool!"

"Stop complimenting yourself! What howler have you made? Seems to me you ought to be congratulating yourself instead of acting as though you'd suddenly gone loco."

"Howler isn't the word, there ought to be a stronger one. Think of me throwing you into a wolf-trap! I have conducted myself like a congenital nitwit. I have behaved like a lunkhead! Now that I've lost you, I value the treasure which I let escape me. Lefumez has definitely opened my eyes, he has just been here singing your praises, and every word he pronounced was so much salt in my wound."

Billie actually felt sorry for him. After all he was her husband!

"You're late, my friend—too late."

De Barestan threw himself on his knees.

"Billie! My little Billie! It can't be too late! You,

an angel, couldn't be so cruel." In his intensity he lowered his voice, "I swear to you that with just one word, one little word, one little look, I will sidetrack Simone, I will disavow that which I have adored—I will break off immediately."

"Too late, Edmond. If my heart were empty I might perhaps let myself be touched by the discomfiture of your appearance and the intensity of your wounded vanity, but now that I've fallen in love with a good and loyal man whom you literally threw into my arms, well, it is too late. I find it impossible to listen to you."

"I'm going to suffer a great deal, Billie."

He put his head in her lap. Billie for a moment let her hand rest on his head.

"My friend," she sympathized, "it would be impossible to make me feel any more tender, but the fault isn't mine. You should have learned to take care of me instead of planning to get rid of me. This is all very touching, but stop for a moment and picture the hundred times that I've suffered in silence myself. Did you interest yourself at all about my poor heart then? My poor heart which you cut into shreds, day by day and night by night. Instead of sympathy you gave me cynicism and instead of understanding, you gave me insults. You have nobody to blame but yourself. I hate to pick on you now, Edmond, but it's the plain, unvarnished truth. Did you not destroy the confidence that I brought to you as a bride? Haven't I

the right to re-make my own life, ruined by you, with the man whom I love? You are the last one to question that right, especially since it was you who pushed me towards him."

The Marquis was crushed.

"Is there anything I can say? There I am, knocked out cold."

"Make the best of the situation. You're not so unlucky. She's charming, your little friend, Simone."

"You have just met her! Thanks. A last year's model, repainted, battery recharged, motor overhauled —an impossible character! Listen, Billie, can't you understand, I don't wish to divorce you at all!"

Billie thrust him away from her.

"How stupid you've grown. Henry and I are about to leave for Italy. Meanwhile, you can commence the necessary conferences with our lawyers for the divorce. Don't be more potty than is necessary."

"No! No!" protested de Barestan, jumping to his feet. "I don't want a divorce any more."

"It's a fine time to say that! You're beginning to sound grotesque. Have you lost your good senses? I've just been telling you that I'm leaving to rejoin the man that I really do love. Don't you understand me?"

But de Barestan was acting like a man at the races who had lost both his wits and his money.

"I don't care what you say," he shrilled, "I don't want a divorce!"

"Edmond, you butted your head into the wall. No one shoved you into it. I'm beginning to lose sympathy for you. You're acting like a silly kid who's lost his candy!"

"Go away, if you want to, to Italy or Timbuktu—I'll wait—but I won't be the one to ask for a divorce."

"Then, all right, it will be I who will petition."

Lefumez suddenly appeared in the bedroom door. It seemed as if Simone had propelled him in at the psychological moment.

"Ah—Billie! Billie!" he blurted out.

Billie got up and went towards him.

"Henry," she appealed, "my husband is cuckoo!"

"How?" asked Lefumez.

"He doesn't want a divorce."

Lefumez looked at de Barestan as if the Marquis had suddenly become completely green.

"What, you? You can't mean that seriously. I know you said something a while ago, but I thought you were joking."

"Joking!" almost yelled the Marquis. "Another word out of you—"

"Edmond, if you'll shout a little bit louder, they may be able to hear you in London."

Lefumez became braver. Billie was still between them.

"You don't want a divorce?" he continued. "Oh, this is excessively annoying—even annoying isn't pre-

cisely the word. I'd rather say, very disagreeable."

"Take him away. He makes me mad as hell!"

"You have me to deal with too," said Billie, "and I'm losing all patience with you. You make me tired. After you tried to make a monkey out of me, you take on airs when I try to rescue, out of the wreck of our marriage, a grain of happiness."

"Is grain the exact word?"

"A stack full of it then. Excuse me, Henry, but listening to Edmond has made me giddy. I'm going to throw some dice of my own."

She glared at Edmond and rushed out of the room.

X

LEFUMEZ, left alone with de Barestan, tried tactfully to right the situation.

"But, my dear fellow, you've lost your head. Edmond, look here."

"Go away, leave me alone. Damn you! Everything that occurred is your fault."

Lefumez meant to stand his ground and he did.

"I like that! My fault?"

"There was no need to have allowed Billie to fall in love with you."

"My dear boy, you talk like a fish. It was you yourself who——"

De Barestan shook his fist at him.

"False brother!"

"Oh!"

"*Tartufe*—Judas!"

"Oh, look here, Edmond—it isn't my fault if she fell in love with me in spite of myself."

"Don't be ridiculous! You're not the kind of a man to be loved in spite of yourself. Go take a look at yourself in the glass."

"Well, jump on me if it'll make you feel any better. I'm a good friend. I'll admit that I'm not a Don Juan nor a Casanova." There was a personal undercurrent to this last. "But after all, I've had a few conquests to my credit."

"Shop girls, yes! Chambermaids, yes! Old women who were dried up for a lover."

Lefumez began to lose his patience.

"Oh, oh, I protest! I rebel!"

"You look as if you would rebel. Don't make me laugh, I'm not in that humour," retorted de Barestan sarcastically.

"You're the last one to upbraid me," snapped Henry. "I pushed my conscience over until I almost disfigured it. I tied knots in myself out there at the château, trying to do the right thing. I made myself look like a scarecrow so as not to tempt your wife. . . . Well, I did. A beard all over my face. Dressed

up in a furniture mover's jacket. I looked like a filthy tramp, that's the right word."

"There was something else that you did."

"Don't take up that tone, Edmond."

"You can't prevent me from telling you that you're a double-crossing friend. A little mountebank without scruples, with or without your damn beard, with or without your furniture mover's shirt. You're a fine friend! You—you—cheat!"

Lefumez was furious.

"I've had enough of this! You loaded the dice on me at the Adam's Apple that night and you faked the pieces of paper. Don't talk to me about cheating!"

"You dare accuse me!"

Lefumez refused to be intimidated.

"I accuse you of being hoisted by your own *pétard*. I've tried to be sympathetic with you, because I really am a very good friend, despite your acting like a ninny, but I'm not going to stand here and have you——" They looked like two roosters at a cock-fight!

The entrance door opened and Billie brought in Maître Sideral, dressed up in his Sunday clothes. Sideral bowed formally.

"Well, I see that you two boys have been sensible and made up," said Billie. "Edmond, allow me to present Maître Sideral, bailiff at Pont-l'Eveque. Mr. Bailiff, this gentleman is my husband. Now listen, Edmond, Maître Sideral has done me the courtesy to

come to Paris to prove to you by his daily affidavits that I've rigorously observed my marital vows. In spite of your attitude, he will give his evidence, but will content himself by making a final affidavit before a proper bailiff here in Paris. It will cover his entire presence at the château. It will permit me to obtain my liberty."

She turned to say something to Sideral. The bailiff was gazing, as though hypnotized, at the Marquis. And the Marquis gave the impression that he'd like to have the earth open and swallow him.

"But—but—" sputtered Maître Sideral. "I know this gentleman." He directed his remarks to the Marquis. "Is it not so, it was you who came to the château—one evening and presented yourself under the name of Pelissier?"

"Yes, that was I," admitted de Barestan.

"What!" snapped Lefumez, "Pelissier. So that was you."

Billie immediately took advantage of the situation.

"Then, if my husband came to spy upon me and saw you in the château, he can no longer doubt my fidelity. Don't worry, Edmond, I'm not such a little goose as you think I am. The real reason why I brought Maître Sideral to Paris and here to your apartment, was to have him witness that my husband is at present living with his mistress in a marital form, which, with or without your permission, Edmond, I will do now."

Maître Sideral felt that he was being ignored. He wished to be prominent in the cast of the next scene. He cleared his throat vigorously.

"M. Pelissier," he said, looking at the Marquise, "I beg your pardon—did I get you right, M. le Marquis is living with a woman here? I may be near sighted, but where is she?"

He glanced about the room as if some genie had hidden the woman under the divan or perhaps under the rug. Billie obligingly called Sideral's attention to a few patent points.

"Maître Sideral, kindly let me call your attention to traces of her presence." She pointed them out. "Her hat, her picture, her powder, her perfumery, her nightgown, her bedspread. You might jot that down in your book."

"I'm jotting it down," said Sideral, "a picture, nightgown—bed sheet—no, no, bedspread, yes I've got that all down."

By this time Billie had crossed the room and opened the bedroom door.

"Mme Diaz," she called softly, "you will excuse me, a little formality. A mere matter of the law, if you don't mind. Maître Sideral, the bailiff, would like to witness your presence in my dear husband's room. I hate to bother you."

Simone appeared in the doorway.

"No bother, my dear Marquise, pleased to be of service."

De Barestan gave a vivid impression of a gentleman who had been laid away, six feet under the sod. All that was needed was a spade to put him down.

But Maître Sideral gave a different impression. This was his first visit to Paris and so it was not unusual that he almost fainted at the effect of the lace pyjamas.

"Just note that down too, Maître Sideral, in your little book. The lady was in lace pyjamas in my dear husband's bedroom."

Sideral was wrestling with the word. It was a new one with him. "Pyjama?" as though the word were Turkish or Javanese.

"Is it a technical word, pyjama, is it a foreign word? How do you spell it?"

"P-y-p-i---! Ah, put down pants!" said Lefumez.

"I've put down lace pants in the bedroom."

As he jotted down the item in his book he absent-mindedly glanced at the lady in question. Simone had come to the centre of the room, under the light. Sideral jumped, then took a closer look.

"Why, it's Mme Pelissier!" he said.

"Ah," said Billie.

"Oh," from Lefumez.

De Barestan was beyond any expression. Maître Sideral recovered his professionally wooden expression.

"Then, Madame, you have been living with M. le

Marquis de Barestan in the absence of his legitimate spouse?"

"I have lived with him, yes," said Simone.

"That's good! I am jotting that down. I will go and telephone a fellow bailiff who will come and draw up my affidavit."

Sideral got up and pocketed his book formally.

"Thanks, Maître Sideral," said Billie.

"Much obliged," said Lefumez.

The suspicion of a smile broke out on the bailiff's face as he bowed formally to de Barestan.

"Good-bye, Monsieur le Marquis. Without the slightest exaggeration, your Calvados was famous stuff, you know. To our next meeting—and clinkings! Ladies, Gentlemen, your humble servant!" He diverted his near-smile to Simone. "Always delighted to be of service. Command me!"

He left the room.

"And now, my dear," said Billie to the Marquis, and her tone left no doubt of her determination, "if you don't start to bring a suit for divorce, I will be the one to petition the judges to give us our liberty. Henry," she addressed Lefumez, "I think we probably would be inconsiderate in troubling any longer the *tête-à-tête* of Mme Simone and M. le Marquis."

Billie's determined manner did not disturb Mme Simone's serenity.

"You're not leaving on my account?" she asked.

Billie looked at her in the best of humour. Here

were two women who understood each other thoroughly.

"No, but after all, love is love and life is life."

She extended her hand and Simone wrung it. "I must thank you, Simone."

"On the contrary, it is I who should thank you—Billie, Mme la Marquise."

Billie looked over at her husband.

"Edmond, shall we quit as friends or as enemies?"

"Billie!" he cried out, tears welling up in his eyes.

"Be happy, old boy, that's the only harm that I can wish you." She impulsively held out her hand.

"Billie!" he said, with as much emotion as he had left.

"Edmond!" said Lefumez, approaching him as if he were about to take the sacrament. "Edmond! —my very best wishes for your happiness!"

He held out his hand. De Barestan started to take it in spite of himself.

"You—you—" hissed the Marquis between his teeth, "get out of here!"

Lefumez bowed to Simone.

"And you, Madame, great happiness to you."

"You are coming, Henry," said Billie at the door. De Barestan groaned.

"He doesn't even wish to shake my hand," Henry lamented.

"Oh, that doesn't mean anything," said Billie,

more to herself than to her husband. "We'll send him a postcard from Florence."

Lefumez, not to be outdone, walked over to Edmond to make a last effort. He held out his hand.

"Edmond!"

De Barestan was so angry that he fairly sizzled.

"You—you—get out of here or I'll not be responsible for what I'll do to you!"

Lefumez shook his head sadly.

"I'm coming, my dear," he said to Billie. He addressed the rest of his remarks to the Gods on high. "No one can ever say that I didn't try to be his most loyal friend."

Billie disappeared. Lefumez rushed out after her.

XI

THEY were gone! Simone sighed with obvious relief. She was delighted that the scene was over. It hadn't been any too easy to go through with at best. She installed herself in an easy chair and lit a cigarette.

"Well, well," she said, as she balanced the burnt match in her hand and took a welcomed puff or so.

"Edmond, we got through that very neatly. Thank God, the situation is now all cleared up. We couldn't have dreamed of anything better."

As she spoke the Marquis posted himself in front of the window, looking somewhat dejectedly through the glass. Mme Diaz went on, she decidedly was in one of those "going on" moods.

"Is it not so, my dear boy? And you have to give credit where credit is due. Your wife really did try to help us out, in her own way. She is really extremely charming, isn't she? She and Henry Lefumez seem to suit each other. I think we are fortunate that this complicated affair worked itself out without any feeling on either side." She yawned in complete relaxation.

"We can think now of luncheon. I just discovered that I'm devilishly hungry. A good bite will prepare us for the future." She rang the bell. "Why, wouldn't it be charming, Edmond, to have our luncheon served in your bedroom, just you and I, a real *tête-à-tête* between lovers, to commemorate this lucky day, the first of our real union."

She rang again and again.

"Look here, we should—"

Louise opened the door.

"Madame rang?" she asked pointedly, perhaps a trifle over pointedly.

"Four times!" snapped Simone, whose good humour was only thin-skinned.

Louise's tone was as sweet as it was ominous.

"No," she corrected, "only three times, Madame."

Simone lost all control. Her voice became thin and sharp, fishwifey.

"I tell you—four times! Don't you dare answer me back and moreover, I only wish to ring once after this to have you come in immediately. I know, that's probably not the sort of service that you've been accustomed to. You probably have worked in some hide-merchant's home."

"No, this is my first experience of this sort," said Louise calmly. "Before coming here, I was with the Comtesse de Rodetzka, and there no one ever spoke to me in the tone of a——"

"Listen, you! You're not going to tell me how to speak to servants! I've taught an army of them their place!"

"I've never been treated like this before in my life," protested the maid, losing some of her sweet tone.

"Before I get through with you, young woman, you'll learn not to be impudent. And you're going to be taught what discipline means in a well regulated *ménage*."

Louise began to cry.

"I would much prefer to leave, Madame."

Her tears had the same effect upon Simone that rain does on a duck's back.

"Don't you dare talk of leaving me!" shrilled Simone. "You're dismissed now, on the spot.

What do you think of that? Stop looking at the Marquis. My word is his word."

"I will leave to-night. It is true, I've had enough."

"Not to-night, pack your things and go now, you insulting little hussy. I will be out in a few minutes to pay you. Good riddance!"

Louise left the room.

De Barestan, a thousand thoughts and yet only one racing through his mind, had remained a silent witness to the scene. He was so angry at himself, at Simone, at everyone, at the world at large, that he couldn't think of anything to say or do. Simone warmed up to his distemper.

"Oh—oh—all this sort of thing I'm jolly well determined is going to change. It is high time that someone—with a firm hand take charge of things here." She addressed her remarks towards de Barestan, who still stood, his back to her, before the window. "Listen, you might do me the common courtesy to approve when I rebuke a servant in front of you. What is this obstinate silence on your part, *hein*? You are not a wax figure! Edmond, I am speaking to you, not to the four walls. What'd you say? Are you going to speak to me—yes or no? . . . Oh, it's going to be a grand silence, is it? God alone knows I've been patient enough. Well, if that's the attitude you take—you're going to see who is the real master here. . . . I'll make you say something."

She reached over to the small table and picked up

a small vase and smashed it to the floor into bits. The Marquis didn't move. She reached over and took a larger vase and crashed that to the floor.

De Barestan, at the window, back still turned, jumped as if Simone had thrown the vase at him, but he said nothing. Simone looked for a very large vase. A Ming the Third would have answered her purpose neatly. Fortunately there were no more vases in sight. She called upon the Gods above and the devils below to witness her helplessness.

"This is the last straw—this is too much! Here I inconvenience myself, I humiliate myself to help you obtain your divorce, and look at the way you thank me. You sulk in the corner like some over-indulged child, who needs a damn good spanking."

Simone went up to the Marquis.

"All I see is your back. What is that you're muttering? Edmond! You're acting like an insane person, when you have every cause to be supremely happy."

The Marquis was attempting again to say something or other.

"Ah! You say you haven't said anything!" she nagged. "I call upon Heaven and Hell to witness, I'm controlling myself from giving you a sharp slap in the face. Oh, you richly deserve it."

More murmurs from de Barestan.

"Oh, your nerves have gone? . . . Well, let me tell you, your nerve hasn't—it's your brass! You

needn't think you can begin to act this way with me. I beg to tell you at the very start that these carryings-on don't help our love. Now listen—you must come and demand my pardon in my room within the next five minutes. If you don't, you needn't expect any loving from me—any loving attitude for the next week, and I think you understand plain speaking. In my room, on your knees, you understand."

Whereupon she entered the Marquis's bedroom and banged the door behind her.

The Marquis did nothing for a moment. There was a ringing in his ears. Then he crossed the room and rang. He took up his hat and coat. As he was putting his coat on, Louise appeared in the doorway. She was quite normal again.

"Louise," said de Barestan in wearied tones, "if Mme Diaz asks for me, tell her I've gone out to get some lunch. That I may not be back to-night—oh, tell her any old thing!" He lowered his voice cautiously. "You are not discharged, Louise, you understand that. Remain here in my apartment."

He came closer and whispered the rest in her ear. The maid could hardly believe what she was hearing. Then she smiled broadly, then began to laugh softly. Looking towards his bedroom door, the Marquis cautioned her to stop and gave her some money.

Once out on the street he began to recover some of his customary poise.

"Must remember," he mused aloud, "to telephone

Cardan to take charge. Merignol, by all means, can see Simone and handle her. *I am sure there is a ship that leaves Marseilles to-morrow for Morocco! I've just time to catch the train for it!*"

He tipped his hat to a rakish angle. He swung his cane in a vigorous circle. He smiled as he noted the well-turned ankle of a passing young thing.

Zut! the Marquis de Barestan was almost himself again!

THE END

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